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PANTHER DICK'S DEATH-LEAP.

BY A. F. HOLT.



EVEN AS KIT FELL, A MAN BEARING A TORCH AND MOUNTED UPON A WIRY MUSTANG DASHED INTO THE VERY MIDST OF THE PACK, YELLING AT THE TOP OF HIS VOICE.

Panther Dick's Death Leap;

OR,

Hurricane Kit and His Pard.

BY A. F. HOLT.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAPPER'S SECRET.

A WILD storm was sweeping over the hills and gulches of Southern Colorado; rain descended in broad, pelting sheets; the thunder rolled and crashed with a force that shook the ground, while almost incessant flashes of lightning rendered the scene as bright as day; the wind swept up the gulch with the velocity of a cyclone, howling and whistling among the tree-tops, and strewing the ground with branches and other debris.

It was a time when human beings sought the nearest shelter, and even the wild beasts slunk to their lairs; yet the region was not entirely deserted, for when the storm was at its height, a single horseman laboriously made his way down a narrow pass in the face of the driving blast.

He was of medium height, muscularly built, while the lightning's flash revealed the handsome, beardless face of a youth of nineteen. Enveloped from head to foot in a Mexican poncho, he bent low in the saddle, encouraging by words and caresses the animal that carefully picked its way among the boulders and fallen trees which strewed the trail.

Suddenly the lone rider straightened up, as he checked his steed with a low word, for the sharp rattle of pistol-shots broke upon his ears. The sound came from just ahead, and the eyes of the youth sparkled as he urged his horse on again.

"If there's any fun a-goin'," he exclaimed, as he felt for his weapons, "I reckon I'll take a hand in it."

Riding cautiously round a sharp bend in the trail, he came upon a startling scene.

Standing with his back to a huge boulder, desperation marked on every feature, an old man in the garb of a trapper was keeping off over a dozen mounted desperadoes.

His revolvers cracked rapidly; but fortune favored his foes, who swarmed around him like angry bees, they, too, using their weapons with deadly intent.

The eyes of the young horseman flashed vengefully as he looked upon the uneven conflict, and saw the brave trapper sink bleeding to the ground, while the ruffians pressed forward with cries of triumph.

The next instant he was charging down upon them with a reckless shout; standing erect in the stirrups, the reins between his teeth, and a trusty revolver clutched firmly in either hand, he dashed in among the desperadoes like a thunderbolt, the crack-crack of his weapons mingling with their astonished cries.

One burly scoundrel threw up his arms and fell heavily to the earth, another reeled in his saddle mortally wounded, while the remainder,

dismayed by the sudden onslaught, wheeled their horses and sought safety in flight.

The victorious young man did not pursue, contenting himself with a few parting shots; then springing from the saddle he sought the side of the fallen trapper.

It required but an instant for him to ascertain that life was not yet extinct, for the man's heart was beating faintly. Lifting him in his arms, the youth carried him to a spot close by, where an overhanging rock sheltered them from the storm.

By the aid of a few dry leaves and twigs, which he was fortunate enough to find, the young rover managed, with considerable difficulty, to kindle a slight blaze; then, by the light of the fire, he made a careful examination of the trapper's injuries.

A bullet had penetrated his breast, just over the heart, leaving a deep, ragged hole, and the young Samaritan, as he looked upon it, sadly shook his head; it was now plain to him that the old trapper had fought his last battle.

Yet the young man was determined to prolong life as much as possible, both from feelings of humanity and from a desire to learn the cause of the cowardly attack.

From his saddle-bags he produced a flask of brandy, and raising the head of the unconscious man upon his knee, he poured a liberal quantity down his throat.

The fiery liquor had the desired effect, for the wounded trapper opened his eyes and glared wildly about him; at sight of the stranger bending over him, he struggled feebly to gain his feet, but was gently restrained.

"Easy, pard!" said the youth, gently. "You are wounded, and must keep still."

"Ah! yes, I remember now," muttered the trapper, pressing his hand to his head. "The cowards were dogging my trail; they were after my secret."

"Secret?" echoed the other, curiously. "What is it, my friend, if I may ask?"

A cunning look appeared in the eyes of the old man.

"Who an' what are you?" he demanded. "You may be one of 'em, for all I know."

"Have no fears on that account, pard. I am your friend. Kit Carroll's my handle, but men hereabout call me Hurricane Kit. You may have heard of me."

The look of suspicion on the trapper's countenance cleared as if by magic at the mention of the name, for it belonged to a youth who was noted for his dashing bravery, and who was the terror of all the evil-doers in that region.

For a moment the old trapper did not speak. Then he looked up into the face of his rescuer and said:

"Pard, I've often heard of you, an' know that you're in every way worthy ov my confidence. I won't be with yer long. I've got my last bullet, an' afore I pass over I want to confide in you my secret. You hev befriended me in time of need, risked your life for mine, an' you shall be well paid fer it, while at the same time I'll baffle the hellions that give me my death-sting. Give me another drink o' that

licker, pard, an' then bend closer, for I've something of importance to tell yer."

Hurricane Kit did as directed, and then the trapper told his story, which is substantially as follows:

Several months before, the old man, who was known as Apache Tom, was scouting in Arizona. One day, while endeavoring to escape from a party of Indians who were in pursuit of him, he accidentally discovered a small opening among the bowlders, into which he crept. Upon striking a light, he was astonished at what he saw. He found himself in a rude chamber, the rocky floor of which was strewn with the precious metal, in the shape of cups and other utensils and uncouth ornaments, evidently the work of some ancient race who had used this place for their treasure-room. For many centuries, doubtless, the place had remained undisturbed, unknown to the modern tribes that roamed that region over, until the old trapper stumbled in upon it.

It is needless to say that Apache Tom was overjoyed at his wondrous discovery, and as soon as the coast was clear he started for civilization, taking with him as much of the treasure as he could conveniently carry. It was his intention to return, and that he might find the spot again, he made a rude map of the vicinity.

His appearance in a mining-town of Southern Colorado with so much wealth naturally attracted the attention of the inhabitants, who vainly endeavored to win his confidence. But one night, his tongue loosened by liquor, he let drop something about the map in his possession. It reached the ears of a ruffian gang, and when, next day, Tom left the town, he was followed by the desperadoes, who fell upon him, but were frustrated in their designs by the appearance of Hurricane Kit, as the reader has seen.

This is, in substance, the story to which Kit listened attentively.

"You may think it a queer yarn, pard," continued the trapper, "but it's true, ev'ry word on't. I've got ther map hyar, concealed atween the soles o' my boot, an' by tracin' it out, ye kin find enuff gold ter make yer rich the rest o' yer life."

"I believe you, Tom," returned Hurricane Kit, "and I will go for the treasure. The scoundrels who shot you shall never—"

He stopped abruptly, for the trapper, who had been steadily growing weaker, sunk back a dead weight in his arms.

Without a moan, without a sigh, the spirit of Apache Tom had left its earthly tenement.

Hurricane Kit gently laid the trapper upon the ground and closed his glassy eyes.

This done, he removed the dead man's boots and searched for the treasure-map, which he found exactly where Tom had told him.

Kit thrust the folded paper into his pocket without examining it, for his first duty was to care for the dead.

Removing his poncho, he wrapped it around the body of the trapper, and lifting it in his arms, carried it to a deep, narrow depression in the ground, where he reverently laid it. This done, he covered the body as well as he could, topping it with a heap of stones to prevent the wolves from reaching the remains.

"Poor fellow!" he muttered. "I'll revenge his death, I swear, if ever an opportunity occurs."

So saying, he returned to the shelter of the fire, and drawing the folded paper from his pocket, carefully examined it.

It was covered with a jumbled mass of dots and lines, the meaning of which was Greek to Kit.

"I don't see as I'm much better off," he mused. "Apache Tom alone knew the meaning of this, and in order to find the treasure-cave, I must first unravel it. And, I must confess, it seems to me now as blind as a Chinese puzzle, though perhaps I might succeed—"

He broke off suddenly, for the horse which he had left standing a short distance away gave a snort of affright and clattered swiftly up the gulch.

With a low exclamation, Hurricane Kit started up, his hand seeking a revolver as he strove to pierce the gloom.

But before he could advance a step, an ominous click-click reached his ears, followed by a voice, rough and stern.

"Hands up! We've got the drop, an' 'll bore ye full o' bullets ef ye move!"

Kit paused in surprise, and at that instant a brilliant flash of lightning made the scene as bright as day, enabling him to see the perilous position in which he was placed.

Directly in front of him and not ten yards away, a dozen men sat upon their horses, grim and motionless as so many specters; each held a leveled rifle, the muzzles of which were concentrated upon one object—the head of Hurricane Kit.

The young adventurer was quick to realize his danger, but his bold heart did not quail. Undaunted by the threatening rifles, he drew his revolvers with a lightning like movement, and with a cry of defiance, turned them upon his foes.

CHAPTER II.

LEFT TO HIS FATE.

WITH the rapidity of lightning, Hurricane Kit pulled trigger; but, to his amazement, no report followed; then he remembered that after emptying his weapons into the desperado band, he had neglected to reload, such was his anxiety to care for the trapper.

The desperadoes, who were the same party that Kit had put to flight a short time before, now surrounded him; and seeing the folly of further resistance, he threw up his hands.

"Wal, pards, I give in!" he said, with the utmost nonchalance. "There's no use kickin', when the drop is on you; but, I say, gents, what's your little game, if I may ask?"

"Plunder's our game," retorted the leader, whom Kit recognized as being Panther Dick, one of the worst outlaws and cut-throats in that region. "Also revenge for the death of Kansas Jack that you laid out, a while back. D'ye catch on?"

And the outlaw laughed exultingly, as his followers pounced upon Hurricane Kit and speedily bound him hand and foot.

The first act of the desperadoes, after making sure of their young enemy, was to rifle his

pockets, which they did in a manner exceedingly thorough.

Of course, the old trapper's map was at once discovered, and Panther Dick seized it with a yell of delight.

"Ha, ha!" he laughed. "We've euchered you, my young bantam. This is the map that'll guide us to the old man's cave, an' the treasure is bound to be ours."

"Don't be too sure of that, my friend," answered the young man, coolly. "He laughs best who laughs last, you know. The game has hardly begun yet, an' there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip."

"Is, hey? Wal, not in this case, unless ye apply it to yerself. You mought's well give up all hopes o' seein' the hidden treasure, for if tomorrow finds you alive I'll miss my guess."

Hurricane Dick met these ominous words with a scornful smile.

"Bah!" he exclaimed, contemptuously. "Go ahead and do your worst. I defy you all!"

Panther Dick smiled grimly.

"We'll soon see," he said, and then immediately issued his orders to his men.

Close at hand, a hardy mountain-pine grew among the rocks. To this the youth was bound so securely that he could not move an inch.

The outlaws wasted no time after once satisfying themselves that their young foe was helpless, but rode away down the pass, their taunting laughter ringing in Kit's ears.

The hoof-beats of their steeds sounded fainter and fainter, and finally died out altogether, and the young ranger was left to his own thoughts.

These were far from being pleasant, as can readily be imagined. Drenched to the skin, his bonds cutting into his flesh, and with the rain beating into his face with a force that almost took his breath away, his position was decidedly uncomfortable, to say the least.

But Kit was not to be daunted by these difficulties; with great patience and coolness he waited, for, he reasoned, the storm would soon abate, and then it was probable that some one would pass that way who would set him at liberty.

Once free, he was determined to immediately take measures for defeating Panther Dick and his band in the struggle for the trapper's treasure.

An hour passed slowly by and the storm gave some signs of abating; the rain gradually decreased in volume, while the thunder and lightning grew less frequent. Soon it ceased altogether, and Luna ventured to show her pale face from behind a bank of clouds.

With the ending of the tempest Hurricane Kit's spirits rose, for he knew that he was near the main trail, and expected to be released by some passing miner.

But in this he was doomed to be disappointed, for no sound of footsteps reached his eager ears.

But instead he heard another sound—a low, long-drawn, lugubrious cry, the meaning of which he knew full well.

It was the howl of some prowling wolf that had issued from its lair in search of prey.

Scarcely had the mournful sound died away when another answered from the distance, at a spot opposite to that from which the first cry issued.

Kit listened attentively, while a shade of anxiety passed over his countenance as he heard the ominous cry caught up and echoed along the mountain-side, until the air was filled with the sound.

Then it was that the bronzed face of the young adventurer, brave though he was, turned a shade paler, and no wonder, for he knew that the ravenous brutes were on the track of prey, and that prey was—himself!

It was more than probable that such was the case, for it was certain that the animals were rapidly approaching the spot, and would eventually discover the youth, even if not on the scent already.

Realizing the horrible fate that awaited him, should he be surrounded by the savage beasts, Hurricane Kit made a supreme effort to burst his bonds.

Vain were his efforts, for a cunning hand had applied the ropes, and, though he tried again and again, he could not move them an inch.

Exhausted with his efforts, Kit sunk back in despair, while the ominous howls steadily increased in number and volume.

He could now hear the patter of many feet, as the beasts rapidly approached him, and presently the pack burst into view round a sharp turn in the gulch.

There were over fifty of them, all gaunt, half-starved beasts, and they swept up the canyon, howling like demons, crowding and overleaping each other in their eagerness to be first at the promised feast.

In the dim moonlight, Hurricane Kit could barely distinguish a dark, moving mass; but soon they were near enough for him to see their gleaming eyes and long, white fangs.

Straight down upon him they came, snapping and snarling, their eyeballs glowing in the gloom like balls of fire.

Panther Dick, with devilish foresight, had divined what would occur, and the way his expectations were being gratified would have caused him great satisfaction, could he have been there to see. There was little probability that the outlaw chief would ever be troubled again by his young foe.

Then, as a last resort, Hurricane Kit gave a loud shout, hoping to frighten them off, for he knew that wolves were cowardly creatures, and seldom attacked a man unless suffering from hunger. This had the effect of checking the animals for an instant, and as they surged around with gnashing teeth and glowing eyes, Kit emitted yell after yell, having a faint hope that his cries might be heard.

But in this he was disappointed, for the angry snarls of the wolves were the only answer that came back to him.

Emboldened by hunger, the pack once more pressed forward. One gaunt brute in the lead gave a leap full at the throat of the youth, who closed his eyes with a shudder, feeling that his time had come; but the distance was too great for the beast, which descended at Kit's feet, sayagely clawing at his legs as it fell.

Strange to relate, the rope of hide that encircled Kit's limbs was torn asunder by the sharp claws, and a feeling of renewed hope filled his breast as he quickly comprehended what had occurred.

His feet were now at liberty, and he speedily made use of them, kicking out with a strength and vigor that served to keep off his assailants.

At the same time he strove with desperate energy to burst the single thong which, passing around his breast, secured him to the tree.

He found it impossible to break it, but succeeded in loosening it sufficiently to squeeze one hand up under.

Then, exultant at his success, he felt for a small knife which he always carried in his breast-pocket. It was there, having escaped the observation of the outlaws, and quickly opening the blade with his teeth, he severed the thong with a single stroke.

All this was done in far less time than it has taken to relate it, and, meantime, Kit had succeeded in keeping off the wolves with his feet, though not without receiving several severe bites.

Once free, Hurricane Kit, whose course of action was already formed, turned and made a spring for the nearest limb.

He caught it and drew himself up out of the reach of the howling pack that surged beneath him.

"Safe, thank Heaven!" he muttered, with a sigh of relief. "Once more has Hurricane Kit landed right-side-up!" and he actually laughed.

Safe? Far from it! Kit laughed too soon.

The slender branch cracked beneath his weight, and he was precipitated into the midst of the wrangling pack below.

One cry rung out upon the air, while the moon hid her face behind a cloud, as if to shut out the terrible sight!

CHAPTER III.

OLD LIGHTNING'S ADVENT.

THE time of the young savage had not yet come, hopeless as seemed his situation.

Even as Kit fell, a man bearing a torch and mounted upon a wiry mustang dashed into the very midst of the pack, yelling at the top of his voice and brandishing the flaming torch wildly in his right hand, while, in his left a revolver did its deadly work.

So suddenly did he make his appearance that he seemed to have dropped from the very skies.

Crushed by the iron-shod heels of the mustang, and intimidated by the fiery brand and the revolver, the maddened and frightened brutes scattered in all directions, while the newcomer leaped to the earth, caught up the motionless body of the now prostrate youth as easily as though he were but a child, remounted, and then sped up the canyon like the wind, leaving the yelping pack far behind.

For a mile he rode at full speed, being satisfied that his burden was alive and not badly hurt; then, once out of reach of the baffled wolves, he drew rein and dismounted.

It took but a moment to kindle a fire, and as it blazed cheerfully up, the rescuer proceeded to examine the injuries of the youth.

Numerous bites and scratches adorned Kit's

arms and body, his face having luckily escaped injury. None of these wounds were deep, and consequently were not dangerous, though some might prove quite painful for some time.

"Ther boy's had a hard time ov it, I reckon," soliloquized the man. "Jerusalem! Five seconds more 'd 'a' finished him, ef I hadn't happened along. As it is, he's worth a dozen dead men yet, for, I'll allow, I'll soon bring him 'round with a drop o' this hyar."

As he spoke, he produced a flask of liquor and poured a liberal quantity down Kit's throat. The stimulant had the desired effect, and the young ranger soon opened his eyes.

It took but an instant for him to comprehend what had occurred, and a shudder passed through his frame as he realized the terrible doom from which he had been so miraculously preserved.

Gaining his feet with difficulty, for he felt faint and dizzy, Hurricane Kit grasped the huge hand of his rescuer.

"Put it there, friend!" he exclaimed. "I don't know who you are, but you've saved my life at the risk of your own, and you have my everlasting gratitude. Hurricane Kit is not the chap to forget a kindness."

"What! Hurricane Kit, hey? Trowsers an' tom-cats! if *that's* yer handle, ye'r' just the sort ov chap I allus ties to. P'rhaps yer don't know me. I'm ginerally known in these diggin's as Ole Lightnin', 'cause I'm sure death when I strike, d'ye see, an' I spend my time scoutin', trappin' an' loasin', principally the latter. Yer may hev heard tell ov me?"

Kit had often heard tell of this eccentric old hunter, though he had never before met him, and he greeted him cordially.

"You're the very man I want," he exclaimed. "A good, reliable pard is what I am in need of, just now, and I reckon I can depend on you."

"I'll allow that ye kin, boyee, ev'ry time," responded Old Lightning, with alacrity. "But what's the rumpus, anyway? What kind ov fun hev ye got on foot?"

"A kind that will make us rich for life, if we succeed," answered Kit, and without delay he proceeded to relate the events of the past few hours.

The old hunter listened with rapt attention, and when Kit had finished he burst out enthusiastically.

"I'm with yer, pard, from the word go. Trowsers an' tom-cats! we'll scoop in ther treasure, an' shet ther other chaps out in ther cold."

"Don't be too sure, old pard, for the chances are against us. But there's a fortune at stake, and we'll do our level best to win it."

"An' you kin bet we'll succeed, or bu'st ther traces a-tryin'," declared Old Lightning, vehemently. "When a *hurricane* an' *lightnin'* jine forces, they're sure to be a 'ull team an' a boss ter let, an' when they gets on ther war-path ye kin count on seein' ther ha'r fly. You hear me!"

Some time was spent in conversation, and then Hurricane Kit declared his intention of taking the rest that he so greatly needed.

So he stretched himself out upon the ground, while his friend, who was wide awake and eager for action, kept a vigilant watch.

At daybreak Hurricane Kit was upon his feet, as well as ever, with the exception of feeling somewhat stiff and sore from his hurts.

Both he and his newly-made pard, Old Lightning, were anxious to start upon their enterprise.

Kit had already formed his plans.

The outlaw, Panther Dick, had the valuable map in his possession, and would certainly follow its directions. Therefore, by following his trail, our friends would soon reach the vicinity of the trapper's cave. Of course it was expedient that they should arrive upon the scene ere the other party obtained the treasure, and Kit was confident that this could be done, for it was probable that Panther Dick, feeling sure that he (Kit) was effectually disposed of, and that no other person knew the trapper's secret, would proceed more leisurely than he would otherwise have done. Once on the scene of action, Kit hoped by superior strategy to make up for the disparity of numbers, and come off victorious in the great struggle for the trapper's treasure.

As soon as it was light enough to see, our friends prepared to start for the scene of Kit's adventure, there to take the trail of the outlaws, and it was then that a new difficulty presented itself.

Hurricane Kit was both unarmed and unmounted, for his weapons had been taken from him by the outlaws, while at the same time his horse, a superb animal, had broken loose and fled, he knew not whither.

This was, indeed, a serious obstacle; but there was an even chance of running across some stray animal, and as for weapons. Old Lightning possessed a miniature arsenal—enough to equip half a dozen men.

For the present, it seemed that the old scout's mustang was destined to carry double; but luck was with our friends for once.

The hoof-beats of a horse coming down the canyon suddenly reached their ears, and they waited in silence to see who the solitary rider might be.

Presently a riderless horse trotted around a turn in the canyon, and Hurricane Kit uttered an exclamation of mingled surprise and delight, for it was his own magnificent animal.

The steed had escaped capture by the outlaws, and was straying through the gulch.

At sight of human beings, he uttered a shrill neigh and sped away, but Hurricane Kit, placing his fingers to his lips, gave a sharp, peculiar whistle; the horse pricked up his ears and stopped, and at a repetition of the signal, turned and trotted up to his young master's side.

Hurricane Kit greeted him fondly, and then vaulted into the saddle. Once there, "Richard was himself again," and the two galloped down the gulch at full speed.

It took but a short time to reach the spot where Kit had been left by the outlaws, and once there it was an easy matter to take up the trail, which was still fresh and plain to be seen.

The sun was barely an hour high when our two friends started in pursuit of their foes, fairly launched upon their venturesome enterprise.

It was a desperate piece of work that they

had undertaken, but both were determined to outwit their enemies and bring back the trapper's treasure, or leave their bones to bleach upon the sandy deserts of New Mexico.

The scene changes!

No longer the mountains of Colorado, but the sandy plains of Eastern New Mexico.

A barren, desolate waste—rocks and sand on every side, with an occasional stunted tree or thicket of mesquit and cactus—such was the country through which two men rode, just as the sun was descending in the west.

The couple were no other than Hurricane Kit and Old Lightning, though they were covered with dust until they were hardly recognizable.

They had followed the trail of the outlaws with untiring persistence, riding hard by day and resting themselves and horses at night, until they arrived at the spot where we now find them—some miles distant from the Canadian River.

Both were in good spirits, and were confident of soon coming up with their rivals.

"I tell you what it is, boyee!" remarked Old Lightning, as the two friends rode along, side by side, at a steady canter, and sharply scrutinizing the trail as he spoke. "We're not fur behind 'em, now, sure's ye'r' born."

"What makes you think so, pard?" inquired Kit, who had an unshaken confidence in the old hunter's trailing ability.

"'Cause this hyar trail ain't but a few hours old. I know that, for the sand is so light and loose hyar, that, disturbed by the wind, it would cover up ev'ry hoof-mark inside o' half a day at most."

"So you think that Panther Dick and his men passed over this spot less than six hours ago?"

"Do I think so? Wal, I'm so sure ov it thet I'll stake my right arm thet it is so. So, don't get oneasy, pard, fur we'll sight ther rascallions afore to-morrer noon, er I'm a double-jointed liar from Liarsville, thet's all."

"How much further will we have to go to find a good place to camp?" inquired Kit. "What with the dust and heat of this forsaken country, I'm about choked for want of a drink."

"Hev patience, pard. I've been hyar before, an' I know the hull kentry like a book. A fork o' ther Canadian runs about five miles from hyar, and thar's whar we'll spend the night. We'll soon be thar."

No more was said, and the pards rode on in silence.

They were now riding over a stretch of mingled sand and stones, where the trail was barely discernible; this continued for over a mile, then, as they approached the stream, the soil grew more firm and solid.

Here the tracks showed very distinctly, and no sooner did Old Lightning set his sharp eyes upon them, than he drew rein with an exclamation of surprise.

"What's the matter, pard?" demanded Hurricane Ki, also halting.

The old scout did not reply, but, sliding from his saddle, he bent low over the prints in the

earth, and examined them attentively in the fast deepening twilight.

Kit knew that his friend had made some important discovery, and he waited patiently for the old man to complete his observations.

Presently Old Lightning rose to his feet, his face wreathed by a peculiar smile, as he exclaimed:

"Pard, we are follerin' a double trail!"

CHAPTER IV.

RIDING FOR LIFE.

ONCE more the scene changes; and it is to the grassy prairies of Northwestern Texas that we would now take the reader.

The sun was just disappearing from sight behind the western hills in all its golden splendor, its last lingering rays falling upon the waving grass and brilliant wild-flowers that covered the plain.

Two persons were riding leisurely over the prairie, while, some distance in the rear, a squad of blue-coated soldiers were slowly advancing.

This party belonged to one of the military posts on the Canadian, and was out on a short expedition up the river.

The couple in advance belonged to this party.

One was a handsome young man of twenty-one, or thereabouts; his name was Fred Fairfax, and he was the son of Major Fairfax, the commander at the post.

His companion was a beautiful girl of nineteen summers, with eyes of heaven's own blue that sparkled with merriment, cheeks made red as roses by the bracing prairie air, and a wealth of golden hair that floated in wavy, unconfined masses about her shapely shoulders.

Her name was Laura Langdon, and she was visiting at the fort with her father, who was an old friend of Major Fairfax.

Being of a fearless disposition, fond of adventure and excitement, she had obtained permission to accompany the expedition, young Fairfax acting as her escort.

Tiring of the slow, monotonous pace of the soldiers, the couple had rode on ahead at a brisk canter, until now their companions were mere specks in the distance.

With the beautiful girl beside him, Fred Fairfax forgot everything else in the pleasure of her company; and so the young couple rode over the flowery prairie, laughing and chatting merrily, unconscious of what was to be a most terrible ending to that day of enjoyment.

The hours sped by unheeded; the sun disappeared from sight, and the shades of night began to settle over the plain.

Fred noticed this with some surprise, for he had not realized how swiftly the time was passing.

"It will soon be dark," he exclaimed. "I think, Miss Langdon, we had better turn about and rejoin the men. They may become anxious about our safety."

Laura signified her readiness to return, and, accordingly, they turned their steeds in the opposite direction.

The party of soldiers was not in sight, being hidden from view by a swell in the prairie.

Fred and his fair companion were just ascending the slope, when suddenly a chorus of shrill cries reached their ears, followed by the rattle of firearms.

The sounds came from the valley on the other side of the slope, and the young man drew rein in surprise, while a slight trace of anxiety crossed his face.

"Something unusual has occurred over there," he remarked. "Remain here for a moment, please, while I ride forward and survey the situation."

He advanced up the slope, dismounting when near the top, and continuing his way upon his hands and knees.

Reaching the crest, he peered cautiously out upon the country beyond.

The sight that was revealed caused his very blood to boil, while his dark eyes snapped vengefully.

Half a mile away, a scene was being enacted that was by no means uncommon in western Texas at the time of which we write.

Crouching in the grass, their slain steeds serving as breastworks, the little squad of soldiers were fighting desperately to beat off a band of twoscore savages, who circled around them.

They had undoubtedly been taken by surprise by the cunning red skins, and all hope of escape was cut off; but, still undaunted, they continued to battle bravely, and more than one painted demon fell before their deadly aim.

The whites were rapidly decreasing in numbers, and even as Fred Fairfax looked the last man fell, while the savages, with exultant yells, surged forward for scalps and plunder.

With a sickening feeling in his heart, the young man made his way back to where his fair companion was anxiously awaiting his return.

In a few brief words, he explained to her what had occurred.

Laura Langdon was brave, and betrayed no fear at hearing the words of her escort.

"What shall we do, Mr. Fairfax?" she asked, calmly.

"There is only one course for us to pursue," replied Fred, after a moment's thought. "The Comanches are directly between us and the fort, so there's no use in attempting to gain it. They are moving this way, and will doubtless soon be here. We will ride to the left, and endeavor to reach a place of concealment before they arrive where they can see us. Then, when they have passed we will strike for the post. Come! No time should be lost."

The next moment they were darting over the plain, on a course at right-angles to the one they had been pursuing.

Fred Fairfax's plans were as well, perhaps, as any that could be devised, but they were destined to be frustrated.

The Comanche commander was cautious, and he sent a brave to scout along the swell in the plain, to guard against a surprise from any foes who might approach on the other side.

This was a move that our friend had not counted on.

Accordingly he was greatly surprised and chagrined when, upon turning in his saddle,

after riding perhaps two hundred yards, he beheld the Comanche scout seated upon his horse in the very spot that he had just vacated.

The savage seemed as much surprised as was Fred, but, after a moment's silence, wheeled, and with a wild whoop, disappeared from view behind the rise.

"We are discovered, Miss Langdon," exclaimed young Fairfax quietly. "The red fiends will immediately pursue us, so we must make our horses go their best."

Side by side they galloped, at a quickened speed; but before half a mile had been covered, the savages appeared upon the crest of the slope.

One series of wild yells was given as the fugitives were seen, and then the band charged helter-skelter in pursuit.

It was the first time that Laura, born and brought up in the East, had ever seen a hostile Indian, and she eyed the party with interest not unmixed with dread.

Naked to the breech-cloth, their repulsive faces rendered all the more hideous by stripes of paint arranged in grotesque shapes, their long, black hair flying in the wind, they certainly presented a most formidable appearance, as they thundered in pursuit of the two fugitives, brandishing their weapons and whooping like so many fiends.

On over the prairie went pursuer and pursued, neither party seeming to gain any advantage over the other.

Darkness soon set in, with the same distance separating the Indians from their intended victims as when the chase began.

Still the Comanches continued the pursuit with fiendish persistence, and thus the minutes flew by.

The gloom soon became so intense that our friends could not distinguish their enemies, but the hoof-beats of the mustangs, plain to be heard, told them that the pursuit had not been abandoned.

Soon these sounds commenced to grow less distinct, and hope once more rose in the breasts of the fugitives, for it was evident that they were beginning to slowly gain upon the red-skins.

"We are beginning to leave them behind," exclaimed Fred Fairfax, cheerfully. "That means safety, for if we can get beyond hearing distance, we can double and throw them off the track. Have courage, Miss Langdon! We'll soon outwit those red-skinned scoundrels behind us, and—"

The young man's speech remained unfinished, for just then his horse stepped into a gopher-burrow, stumbled and fell, throwing its rider over its head.

Fred alighted upon his feet unharmed, just as Laura drew rein with a low cry of alarm.

"I'm all right, miss," he said, assuringly, as he made a hasty examination of his fallen steed. "Don't be alarmed."

To his utter dismay, the young man found that the animal's leg was so badly injured as to render it unfit for further use.

This new difficulty put a check on Fred's buoyant spirits, but he did not hesitate an instant.

"Here's more bad luck," he said lightly, speaking with a cheerfulness that he was far from feeling. "My horse is hurt, and so your animal will have to carry double."

He swung himself up behind his fair companion as he spoke, and again they sped over the plain.

Exultant yells from behind soon told that the Comanches had come upon the disabled horse, and divined what had occurred, while the sounds of their advance grew nearer and nearer.

The situation of our friends was now extremely critical.

Doubly laden as he was, the single horse could make but little headway, and their capture was merely a question of time.

Fred Fairfax was gloomy and despondent.

It was not for himself that he cared so much, but for the beautiful maiden beside him.

She had left the fort under his protection, and therefore he felt responsible for her safety.

He shuddered to think of what would follow her capture by the red demons behind them, and then a desperate resort occurred to him, which he determined to try should all else fail.

"Anything," he thought, "to save this lovely, innocent girl from the fiendish doom that awaits her."

With his mind firmly made up on this point, Fred Fairfax turned and watched for the savages; the latter were gaining rapidly, and soon their forms were distinguishable, looming up like grim phantoms in the gloom.

They were now within easy pistol range, and Fred, drawing a revolver, took careful aim and fired.

The sharp report of the weapon was answered by a yell of agony, as the foremost Indian threw up his arms and toppled from his mustang.

Whoops of rage came from the Comanches, and Fairfax, encouraged by his success, tried another shot, which, however, flew wide of the mark.

Again he essayed, but with the same result, and still the red-skins came sweeping down, gaining on the fugitives at every bound, filling the air with triumphant hoots as they beheld their victims almost within their clutches.

The time of action had arrived, and Fred leaned over the maiden before him.

"I'm going to leave you now, miss!" he exclaimed. "Ride straight ahead, and I'll do all I can to aid your escape. Good-by!"

And with a sudden impulse that he could not restrain he bent forward and pressed his lips to the fair girl's cheek.

The next instant the brave young fellow slid to the ground, at the same time striking the horse a heavy blow upon the flank, causing the animal to bound away with increased speed.

With firmly-compressed lips and flashing eyes, Fred faced the oncoming Comanches, a leveled revolver in either hand.

His object was to keep the Indians in check as long as possible, hoping that, with the time thus gained, Laura would succeed in making good her escape.

Of course such an act meant speedy capture or death to him, but the gallant young fellow

considered his life of minor consequence when compared with that of the fair young girl with whom he had just parted.

Down swept the red skins in a compact body, eager for the scalp of their young foe; the next instant Fred opened fire, his revolvers playing a sharp accompaniment to the demoniac yells of the Comanches. Then confusion reigned!

CHAPTER V.

A DESPERATE LEAP.

STANDING firm as a rock, Fred Fairfax fired shot after shot at the advancing Comanches, as fast as he could pull the trigger.

One brawny brave threw up his arms and, with a loud yell, pitched heavily to the earth; another reeled in his saddle, mortally wounded; but this did not check the impetuous dash of the survivors.

Like a human cyclone they swept down upon the daring youth, who was struck by the swiftly moving mustangs and hurled violently to the earth, where he lay unconscious.

A Comanche warrior threw himself upon the prostrate form, knife in hand, but ere he could secure the coveted scalp, a tall, paint-bedecked savage, whose eagle-feathers proclaimed him a chief, sprung forward and caught the upraised arm, at the same time uttering a few sharp words in the Indian tongue.

The warrior reluctantly restored his weapon to its sheath, and Fairfax was securely bound hand and foot.

Two braves remained to guard the prisoner, while the others pressed forward in pursuit of the flying maiden.

Laura Langdon, meanwhile, was being carried over the prairie at a breakneck speed.

The gallant animal beneath her, relieved of the extra weight, coursed away at a speed that was marvelous, considering that he had so long been in constant motion.

Frightened, bewildered by the exciting events of the past hour, her brain confused and reeling, the maiden clung desperately to the long mane of the horse, leaving him to choose his own course and speed.

Behind her came faint cries and the dull tramp of hoofs, telling that her fiendish foes were still on her track.

She wondered what had become of her brave companion, and shuddered as she imagined him lying, scalped and bleeding, at the feet of his destroyers.

The moon was rising now, and as it mounted slowly into the heavens, flooding the prairie with its mellow radiance, Laura could plainly distinguish the forms of her pursuers, now less than a quarter of a mile behind.

Horrible, indeed, they seemed, and the poor girl turned her eyes away with a shudder, while she offered up a fervent prayer for her deliverance.

Minutes passed by, and still over the moonlit plain rode pursuers and pursued.

The superior powers of endurance possessed by the wiry little Indian mustangs now began to tell, and they gained rapidly upon the well-nigh exhausted animal ridden by the fair fugitive.

Laura saw this with feelings of dismay; and

she peered anxiously ahead, vainly hoping that some scouting-party of soldiers would appear in time to save her. But no such welcome sight met her eyes.

Suddenly she uttered a low cry and reined in her steed at the very brink of a wide chasm that stretched across the path; another step forward would have precipitated horse and rider into the depths of the abyss.

The maiden's escape was blocked by a stream which, as is often the case with the rivers of the Southwest, flowed through a deep canyon, many feet below the level of the plain.

The stream at this point described a curve like a horse-shoe, and into this narrow strip of land Laura had unwittingly rode.

It was too late to retrace her course, for already the Indians were near enough to intercept her, should she endeavor to escape in that way.

Never was human being more completely trapped.

Like a stag at bay, the beautiful girl sat upon her panting horse, looking first at the approaching savages, then at the broad gulf that separated her from freedom.

If she could only cross the chasm! But the distance seemed too great for any horse to leap.

Escape was certain if she succeeded, but if she failed, death awaited her upon the jagged rocks below.

However, any fate was preferable to the one which would be hers should she fall into the clutches of the red demons behind her she thought, and in her desperation she resolved to take the chances.

Turning her steed, the determined girl rode back as if to meet the Indians, who, thinking that she was about to surrender, slackened speed and awaited her approach.

But when about fifty yards from the canyon, the daring girl wheeled her horse and sped straight toward it.

Yells of astonishment arose from the Comanches, who, when they had recovered from their amazement, pressed on in pursuit, thinking that the fugitive would abandon her desperate attempt to cross the chasm.

But Laura did not for an instant falter.

Life, liberty, honor—everything was at stake.

Like an arrow from the bow, the horse sped over the ground, seeming to know what was expected of him.

Quickly the brink was reached, and then, gathering all his strength for one supreme effort, the animal shot out into the air.

But the distance was too great; the opposite brink was missed by several feet, and horse and rider disappeared in the gloomy depths of the abyss.

Down, down shot the girl with a velocity that nearly took her breath away.

Then came a loud splash, and Laura found herself struggling in ten or twelve feet of ice-cold water.

Struggling wildly in the darkness, her hand came in contact with a stout branch overhanging the water; clutching desperately to this, she managed to reach the bank, while the body of the horse, killed by the fall, floated down the stream.

At this particular point, the water had collected in a deep pool, and it was fortunate for Laura that she alighted therein, for, had she struck where the stream was more shallow, she would doubtless have been instantly killed by the sharp rocks at the bottom.

As it was she had escaped uninjured, beyond a slight shaking up.

Faint and dizzy, Laura stood upon the bank, shivering with cold from her recent immersion.

Far above her the stars were merrily twinkling, and she could distinguish the shadowy forms of the Comanche warriors, and hear their guttural exclamations, as they peered over the brink of the chasm.

Fearful lest they should discover her, Laura looked around for a hiding-place.

At the bottom of the canyon the gloom was so intense that objects a yard away were undistinguishable.

Guided by the sense of feeling alone, the girl laboriously made her way along the bank, continually stumbling into pools of water and over rocks and snags.

Her arms and ankles were cut and bleeding from frequent contact with the sharp fragments, but she heeded not the pain, so eager was she to get as far as possible from the hated savages.

But her strength was not equal to the emergency.

She felt herself growing weaker every moment, and at last her brain began to whirl, a thick mist floated before her eyes, and she sunk unconscious upon the damp earth.

Meanwhile, the red-skins on the prairie above were not idle.

Black Fox, the Comanche chieftain, was greatly impressed by Laura Langdon's beauty, and he had determined to carry her back with him to his village, there to become the light of his wigwam.

Therefore, he was loth to depart from the spot, until he knew whether or not the pale-face maiden was really dead.

It might be, he thought, that she had survived that desperate plunge; so he set his warriors to searching for a place where they could descend to the bottom of the canyon.

The sides of the chasm, however, were too steep to admit of climbing; but Black Fox was not to be baffled.

There were plenty of stout hide lariats, and by tying a number of these securely together, a rope was made of sufficient length to reach to the bottom.

One end of the rope was made secure, while at the other a slip-noose was made; this noose was fixed securely around the body of the lightest brave, who was then lowered down into the chasm by his companions.

He soon reached the bottom of the canyon, and, detaching the rope, lighted the torch with which he was provided, and commenced to search for the maiden.

It was not long ere he discovered the prostrate form, and he announced his discovery by an exultant whoop.

Lifting the unconscious maiden in his arms, the warrior returned to where the rope was dangling in the air; adjusting the noose about

his waist, and clasping Laura tightly, he gave the signal and was slowly hauled up to the top with his lovely burden.

Black Fox was in ecstasies, as he looked upon his beautiful captive, and he hugged her in his brawny arms as if afraid she would suddenly take unto herself wings and fly away.

The Comanches now rode away, soon arriving at the place where the two warriors were guarding their prisoner.

Fred Fairfax had recovered his senses some time before, and he watched the approach of the party with great anxiety.

When he saw the burly chief ride up with the now conscious girl in his arms, a deep groan escaped his lips.

"Great Heaven!" he muttered. "All my efforts have been in vain and she has been captured after all. God help her!"

The Comanches now made preparations for spending the remainder of the night in rest, for their mustangs were unfit to be ridden further, after the long chase just ended.

The animals were picketed close by, where they could feed on the luxuriant prairie-grass, while a fire was kindled in a deep hollow where the flame could not be seen by any one passing over the plain.

This done, the Indians produced a quantity of jerked venison, from which they made a substantial meal.

Black Fox offered some of it to Laura, but the girl was too dispirited to eat; as for Fred, he did not get the offer of any, receiving instead sundry kicks and punches whenever a savage passed by him.

All these insults, however, the young man bore in silence, knowing well the uselessness of doing otherwise.

When the braves had satisfied their voracious appetites, and were tired of abusing their prisoner, they stretched themselves out upon the ground and were soon fast asleep, with the exception of two warriors posted as sentinels and the chief, Black Fox.

The latter remained awake, taking up a position right in front of his beautiful captive, his basilisk-like orbs fastened gloatingly upon her fair face.

Laura, with a shudder, closed her eyes to keep out the repulsive face.

For some time the chief sat there, his glittering eyes never once leaving his fair prize; then he, too, succumbed to the drowsy god.

The weary maiden soon dropped into a broken, fitful slumber, leaving Fred the only one awake.

As may be imagined, the young man had no desire for sleep; his brain was busy thinking of some plan by which he could escape with Laura from their unpleasant position.

If he could only free himself, there was a chance of reaching the mustangs and eluding the sentinels; but the thongs that bound him were too securely fastened, and after several attempts to burst them, he was obliged to give up in despair.

The hours dragged slowly by, and at break of day the Comanches were astir and preparing to move.

Laura Langdon was compelled to ride by the

side of the chief; while Fred was forced to mount a mustang, the owner of which had been sent to the happy hunting-grounds of his race the night before.

His feet were tied together beneath the body of the animal, while his hands were left at liberty; however, a sharp-eyed brave rode on either side, on the alert to frustrate any attempt to escape that the young man might make.

In this manner the party started, riding over the plain at the long, steady lope peculiar to Western horses, proceeding in a southeasterly direction.

Their destination was, without doubt, the Indian village, situated in the very heart of the Comanche country; and Fred Fairfax knew full well that, unless they escaped before reaching there, their doom was sealed.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD LIGHTNING STRIKES A BLOW.

"PARD, we're follerin' a double trail!"

Thus remarked Old Lightning, the veteran scout, as he concluded his scrutiny of the hoof-marks in the trail.

His companion, Hurricane Kit, regarded him in surprise.

"What do you mean, pard?" he demanded.

"I mean that another party has gone over this trail, behind Panther Dick's gang, less'n three hours ago," declared the scout, positively.

"I don't see how you can tell," said Kit, with a puzzled air. "Never was good at reading signs. Explain!"

"Then look at these hyar tracks," exclaimed Old Lightning, pointing to the trail. "Ye see hyar ther tracks o' the outlaws' hosses, an' ye kin see by the prints o' the shoes that they are shod."

"Yes."

"Wal, right hyar among them are the tracks of other hoofs, but you will observe that they are minus ther shoes."

"Sure enough, pard!" exclaimed Hurricane Kit. "I see it now, plain as day, though I should never have noticed the difference. You've got a wonderfully sharp pair of eyes, friend."

Old Lightning smiled complacently.

"I reckon the ole man's as good's they make 'em, when it comes ter readin' sign," he said, with pardonable pride.

"This new party is behind the other," he continued. "It's easy enuff 'er tell that, for in many places the marks of the shod hoofs are covered by the others."

"But who do you think the new-comers are?" inquired Kit.

"They may be a party ov scouts an' hunters," replied Old Lightning, promptly; "but that is doubtful, fur it is seldom that so large a party o' whites is seen in these parts. It's more'n likely that it is a gang o' red skins, an'—Trowsers an' tomcats! *this proves it!*"

As he spoke the scout darted forward and seized an object that lay half-concealed in a tuft of grass.

"An arrow!" cried Hurricane Kit, as the other held the object up to view.

"Yas," replied Old Lightning, as he closely

inspected it. "This hyar's a Comanche war-arrer, an' no mistake, an' it shows that ther red-skins hev been out on the war path."

There was a moment's silence.

"Well, pard, what shall we do?" Hurricane Kit then asked, leaving everything to the judgment of the more experienced scout.

"We'll do a leetle reconnoitering first, jist to find out how the land lays," answered Old Lightning. "Then, if we kin get around the red-skins without trubble, all right; if not, why then thar'll be a red-hot circus round hyar. I reckon we ain't goin' to be shut out from our chance for the treasure, jist because a pack o' copper skins are in ther way."

Hurricane Kit was of the same opinion, and without further loss of time, the two treasure-seekers advanced.

They rode with due caution, their eyes constantly piercing the fast-deepening twilight, ready to draw rein the very instant that they detected danger.

Suddenly Old Lightning, who was in the lead, uttered a low exclamation.

"What is it, pard?" queried his companion. "Another discovery?"

"Trowsers an' tomcats—yes!" responded the veteran, as he secured a white object that was fluttering upon a mesquite beside the trail. "Jest look at this hyar, an' tell me what ye think."

Hurricane Kit regarded the object in surprise.

"It's a piece of cloth from a woman's dress," he exclaimed.

"Eggsactly so! An' hyar's somethin' ter match it," said the old scout, as he picked from off the ground a bright blue ribbon.

"Great Cæsar," cried Kit. "Anything more?"

"There's no tellin' how much more's ahead," answered Old Lightning, grimly. "However, hyar's enough ter tell us that the Comanches hev got a captive ov the female persuasion, for Injuns themselves don't ginerally w'ar caliker an' ribbons. Probably the co, per-skinned varmints hev be'n raiding a ranch, an' they are takin' their prisoners an' plunder ter their big village, which lies 'bout sixty miles south of hyar."

"Then," said Hurricane Kit, decidedly, "we must rescue them if such a thing is possible."

"Ay, pard, that's the idea. I opine that, if ther reds ain't too thick, we'll fall on 'em like a thousan' o' brick. But we must go to work easy, an' sorter get the lay o' the land afore we commence biz."

"The stream is only 'bout a mile away, an' probably thar's where the varmints 'll spend the night; so we kin count on soon catching up with 'em."

Once more our two friends moved forward.

They proceeded very slowly, for it was not deemed advisable to move faster than a walk; the soft, sandy nature of the soil favored them, for the hoof-beats of their horses gave forth no echoes.

Thus they cautiously advanced, until three quarters of a mile had been covered.

Then Old Lightning, who was leading the way, suddenly drew rein, uttering as he did so a low, warning hiss.

Instantly Kit came to a halt.

"What's up?" he demanded, in a whisper.

"Down from your horse!" said the scout, in the same guarded tone, and setting the example by quickly dismounting.

Under the shadows cast by a clump of mesquites, men and beasts stood motionless as statues.

"Look yonder, pard, an' tell me what yer see," whispered the scout, as he pointed up the trail.

Hurricane Kit looked in the direction designated, and beheld the form of an Indian warrior looming up in the semi-darkness ahead of them.

"There's only one of 'em," said Kit, coolly. "I reckon we can get away with him easy enough."

"Yaas!" assented Old Lightning. "Thar's only a single, solitary red thar, I'll allow, but our success, pard, depends on the way we git round him. Yer see, he's actin' as sentinel, so ther rest o' ther gang can't be fur off. Therefore, we must silence this 'coon without kickin' up a rumpus thet'll alarm the Comanches, or else our goose'll be cooked for sure."

"How shall we do it? With the lasso?" asked the young adventurer, reaching for his lariat, which was coiled about the saddle-bow.

The old Indian-fighter shook his head negatively.

"It ain't sure enough," he said decidedly. "Ther noose might be slow in slippin', an' if ther varmint had time ter let out one screech, it'd spile ther hull bizness."

"Then what are your intentions, pard?"

"You'll soon see," returned Old Lightning, confidently. "Leave everything ter ther ole man, boyee. He's been in this kind ov a place, many's the time, an' he's never yet failed ter cum out top o' the heap. Jest you stay hyar an' keep the horses quiet, while I go an' call on thet Comanche over thar."

The scout drew his keen-edged bowie from his belt, and, placing it between his teeth, dropped upon his stomach and crawled slowly toward the Indian sentinel.

Kit watched his movements with considerable anxiety.

Keeping in the shadow as much as possible Old Lightning crept slowly along, winding over the ground like a serpent, every movement bringing him nearer to his foe.

As unsuspecting of the threatening danger, the Comanche sentinel paced slowly to and fro.

His arms were folded, and his head was bowed.

He was doubtless thinking of the dusky maid who would welcome his return to the Indian village, and did not even dream of the doom that pended over him.

With the noiselessness of a snake, the scout made his perilous way, while Hurricane Kit, from his place of concealment, held his breath as he watched him.

Nearer and nearer Old Lightning approached, until at last only about twenty yards separated him from the sentry.

Just then he came upon a dry stick, which snapped in twain beneath his weight.

Scarcely was the sound, it reached the ears of

the Comanche brave, who was instantly upon the alert.

With drawn bow, he glared suspiciously in the direction of the sound, ready to send an arrow into the intruder as soon as he discovered him.

Hugging close to the ground, Old Lightning seemed a part of the gray earth itself.

In the dim light, the sentinel could not distinguish the difference; but, his suspicions being aroused, he determined to make sure that no enemies were prowling about in the vicinity, and accordingly he advanced straight toward the spot where crouched the hunter.

Hurricane Kit viewed this movement with dismay. Of course the scout would quickly be discovered, if the red-skin kept on, and he raised his revolver to shoot down the Comanche warrior.

Disastrous though this course would be, he considered the life of Old Lightning of far more consequence.

But, fortunately, he was not obliged to explode his weapon, for, at the very moment he was about to pull trigger, he saw the old scout's arm suddenly uplifted, and then the Comanche stopped, staggered, and fell prone upon the earth with a low, gurgling cry.

Then Old Lightning leaped to his feet, and the next moment was bending over the fallen warrior.

The red-skin was evidently dead, for the scout, after a brief examination, returned to where his friend awaited him, his bronzed face wreathed with an exultant grin.

"All's serene, boyee," he exclaimed, triumphantly. "Ye kin count on ther ole man, ev'ry time."

"How did you manage it, Lightning?" inquired Hurricane Kit. "I thought you were certainly discovered."

"An' so I was," replied the hunter, with a grim smile, "but ther discovery didn't do ther red-skin any good. Yer see, I objected ter havin' an arrer run through my pizzard, so I let ther knife drive. It war a risky thing ter do, but I tuk ther chance, an' ther blade struck him squar' on ther breast. The varmint never knew what hit him."

"It was a wonderful throw, pard."

"I'll allow it war a tol'able good 'un, considering who done it," returned Old Lightning, coolly. "But, cum! We're spendin' too much time a-chinnin' when we oughter be ter work. Let's proceed ter biz."

"That's what I'm anxious to do," said Kit. "But what about the horses—shall we take them further or leave them here?"

"We'd better leave 'em," answered the scout, promptly. "The camp must be close at hand, so it wouln't be safe ter take ther animiles any further."

Accordingly, the steeds were led into a thicket and there left; our friends did not trouble to secure them, for they knew that the faithful animals would not leave the spot until they returned.

Then our two friends moved in the direction of the Indian camp, Old Lightning leading the way.

They proceeded slowly, exercising the utmost

caution, and after about five hundred yards had been passed over, the scout halted and pointed ahead without speaking a word.

Kit reached his side and looked in the direction indicated, and as he did so he beheld the camp of the Comanches.

CHAPTER VII.

STAMPEDING THE MUSTANGS.

A BROAD, deep stream proceeded through the plain, on one side a level, grassy expanse, and on the other a sloping bank, dotted with clumps of bushes and small trees.

Beside the stream were encamped the party of Comanches, with whom we have already had something to do.

A large fire was burning, and around it were gathered the savages, some stretched upon the ground, others stalking slowly about.

Seated upon the ground, several yards from the fire, their backs to the trunks of trees, to which they were tied, were the two captives, Fred Fairfax and Laura Langdon.

In the background the mustangs of the Indians were cropping the rich grass.

The bright face of Luna, queen of night, appeared in a cloudless sky, shedding her mellow light over all.

Such was the picturesque scene upon which gazed our two friends, Hurricane and Old Lightning, from their post of observation in a clump of bushes on the opposite side of the stream.

The face of the old scout wore a look of triumph as he pointed over the creek.

"Thar's yer camp, an' thar's yer gal prisoner, jest as I told ye," he said, "though I hadn't counted on a second captive."

"The other is a man," remarked Kit, "and I don't see why they should spare his life when they are so eager for scalps."

"They've got an object," returned the scout. "The chap probably give 'em a hard tussle, an' p'raps wiped out some o' their braves; so they're takin' him to the big village, whar they kin burn him at the stake an' furnish fun fur ther whole tribe. Their revenge'll be much sweeter, ye see, than if they simply scalped him. That's a pleasant little hit the critters hev got."

"But they must be thwarted in their designs," exclaimed the young adventurer, determinedly. "It's our duty as fellow-beings to make an effort to rescue them."

"You're right, pard. That's the way to talk. No man'd leave a fellow-critter in the lurch when thar's a show fur helpin' him. Rescued they shall be, and that, too, before another sun rises. I say so, and when Old Lightning makes up his mind to do anything, ye kin depend on it that he'll carry her through er bust a-tryin'."

"Good enough, pard! Put it there!" cried Kit, and the hands of the two men met in a hearty clasp.

All thoughts of Panther Dick's gang were banished from their minds; eager though they were to obtain the trapper's treasure and thwart their rivals, yet they regarded a human life to be of far more consequence. All their energies were bent toward rescuing the unfortunate victims of the Comanches.

"Now for business," exclaimed Hurricane Kit. "I'll leave the planning to you, pard, for I lack your experience in dealing with these copper-skinned rascals."

"All right! Let me think!" was the laconic response of the veteran, whose sharp eyes were wandering restlessly up and down the stream.

Fully five minutes the scout sat there with bowed head, deeply buried in thought.

When at length he looked up, there was a look of intense satisfaction upon his rugged face.

"I've struck it!" he cried, joyously. "Got a scheme in my noddle-box that's bound ter do ther bizness in bang-up style."

"Let's hev it, pard," said Kit, eagerly.

Old Lightning at once proceeded to unfold his plans, which were substantially as follows:

The scout was to proceed down the stream, until he was opposite the spot where the mustangs of the Indians were grazing. Then he was to get among the animals, make a commotion, and stampede them if possible.

As a natural consequence, the red-skins would at once rush to secure their property, and Hurricane Kit was to seize this opportunity to liberate the captives.

This done, he was to retreat to where they had left the horses, where the scout would join them with a couple of the Indian mustangs.

Such was, in substance Old Lightning's plan.

He relied on the confusion of the savages and their difficulty in recovering their animals, to get a good start; then it would be a comparatively easy matter to make their escape.

The old scout's scheme was a good one, and Hurricane Kit indorsed it heartily.

"I'm ready to carry out my part of the programme," he said. "Confound the moon! I wish it would hide its face for a while; it would make our work twice as easy to accomplish."

"Hev patience, pard, an' ye'll soon get yer wish," remarked Old Lightning, quietly. "See that bank of clouds a-comin' this way! Thar's a storm a-brewin', an' ther moon'll be clouded in less'n an hour."

"Then we'll wait, eh?"

"Yas!" assented the veteran, and then, after a moment's silence, he exclaimed:

"Hello! Trowsers an' tomcats! I've got an idea. Stay here, pard, an' watch ther reds. I'll be back in a jiffy."

So saying, he backed out of the bushes and disappeared from view.

Hurricane Kit continued to watch the movements of the Comanches on the plain, waiting impatiently for the time of action to arrive.

Ten—twenty minutes passed, but the scout did not return.

Our hero, however, was not in the least concerned for the old man's safety, relying on his ability to take care of himself.

Suddenly a slight noise behind him caused him to turn, and as he did so he saw the hideously-painted face of a Comanche warrior glaring into his own.

With a surprised exclamation, Hurricane Kit leaped to his feet, his hand clutching a revolver with a lightning like movement.

But ere he could elevate the weapon, the seeming Indian threw up his hands, at the same time exclaiming in the well known accents of the scout:

"Trowsers and tomcats, boyee! D'ye want ter 'tract ther 'tention ov ther reds over the drink? Down with yer!"

Our hero resumed his former position, and eyed his friend in amazement.

"Where in thunder did you get the make-up, Lightning?" he demanded. "Your own mother wouldn't know you in that rig."

The veteran smiled complacently.

"Me big Injun! Heap brave! Waugh!" he exclaimed. "Reckon I'm as good a red-skin as ye kin find; leastwise, good enough to answer my purpose."

"Where did you get the things, pard, and what's your object?"

"Got 'em from ther buck I laid out back thar. A leetle paint an' a few feathers did the business, an' with this red blanket coverin' me from head to heels, I opine I kin pass muster in the darkness, an' do my share ov ther work right afore their noses."

"It will make it much easier for you to enter the camp," said Kit. "The red-skins will take you for one of their own number."

"Exactly!" returned the scout. "That's what I'm relyin' on in case ther varmints see me."

Together the two men impatiently waited for the time to arrive when they could put their plans into execution.

Old Lightning's prophecy concerning the weather proved to be correct, for, ere an hour had elapsed, the moon was hidden behind a bank of threatening clouds, and an intense gloom, that was only relieved by the light of the camp-fire, covered the earth.

"Now's our time, pard!" exclaimed Old Lightning. "It's darker'n a stack o' black cats, an' thar'll be a thunderin' rain afore long. It couldn't hev be'n better for us."

The scout had rolled up the Indian blanket, and strapped it to his back, and now, all ready to act his part in the scene to follow, he stepped forth from the covert and crawled down the hillside to the river.

Then, dropping into the stream, he waded out until the water reached his shoulders, whereupon he turned and moved cautiously up-stream, only his head and neck being visible above the surface.

He progressed slowly and noiselessly, until he reached a point opposite the camp-fire, which reflected its light over the stream, rendering objects on the water for a short distance as plain as day.

The scout hesitated and glanced toward the Comanches.

The greater part of the savages were facing that way, and it was evident that he could not cross that lighted place without being seen.

However, Old Lightning was equal to the emergency.

He felt as much at home in the water as a beaver, and, quickly diving, he swam beneath the surface.

When he arose, the dangerous point was passed, and he was once more in the shadows.

With a grunt of satisfaction at having eluded the sharp eyes of the Comanches, the veteran kept on until he reached a spot directly opposite where the mustangs were tethered.

Here he turned and swam with a long, sweeping stroke until he reached the shore.

Drawing himself up on the bank, the scout sat down among the bushes and wrung the water from his clothes.

This done, he proceeded to wipe dry his revolvers and put in fresh loads.

When satisfied that the weapons were in good working order, Old Lightning unfolded his blanket, wrapped it round him, and then stalked boldly toward the mustangs.

Owing to the darkness, he was not seen by the Indians at the fire; if he had been, however, he would doubtless have been taken for one of their comrades, for the old scout looked and acted the savage perfectly.

Without hesitating an instant, Old Lightning advanced, and he succeeded in reaching the animals without encountering any one.

Then he stopped short with a muttered imprecation, for he had discovered that the mustangs were guarded.

A single warrior was pacing up and down near at hand, and Old Lightning's eyes glittered determinedly.

"Thar's only one varmint," he muttered to himself, "an' I reckon I kin settle him in short order."

Just then the guard discovered him and advanced slowly that way, thinking, no doubt, to relieve the tediousness of his vigil by a chat with his supposed comrade.

Calm and apparently unconcerned, the scout awaited the approach of the Comanche warrior; but his eyes were blazing fiercely and his face wore a look of stern resolve, while beneath the folds of the blanket one hand clutched the haft of his trusty bowie.

Nearer came the sentinel!

He was soon close enough to recognize the gaudy blanket as belonging to the brother-warrior who had been left to watch the rear, and he then quickly advanced with a cry of surprise.

"Why is not my brother, the Red Fox, at his post?" he demanded, speaking in his native language.

Old Lightning could speak the Comanche tongue like a native, and he did not hesitate an instant in replying to the question put to him by the savage.

"The chief sent another brave to relieve me," he said, quietly.

At the sound of the hunter's voice the Comanche started and glared suspiciously at him, for the tones were far different from those of the warrior whom he was impersonating.

Old Lightning was quick to realize that his voice had betrayed him, and, without an instant of hesitation, he threw aside the blanket and sprang upon the Comanche warrior.

The latter started back with a loud cry of alarm, but he was not quick enough to escape the threatening danger.

The iron fingers of the scout encircled his neck in a vise-like grip, and the next instant the keen blade was buried to the hilt in his dusky breast.

The brave sunk to the earth like a log, and Old Lightning peered through the darkness in the direction of the camp.

"Trowsers an' tom-cats!" he muttered. "Thet thar yell the varmint let out was enuff ter rouse ther dead. I'll hev ther hull nest ov 'em buzzin' round my ears in less'n three minutes if I don't luk sharp."

He was right. The confused cries and patter of feet told that the Comanches had heard the death-yell of their comrade and were coming, post-haste, to ascertain the cause of the commotion.

As may be imagined, the scout did not loiter.

Whatever was done must be accomplished at once, and the scout instantly dashed among the mustangs, brandishing his arms and yelling wildly, as, with his keen-edged knife, he rapidly slashed the ropes that secured the animals.

Then occurred just what he had planned for—a stampede of the mustangs.

Terrified by the unearthly din, they broke loose and, snorting in affright, rushed madly over the plain in a confused body.

The work of Old Lightning was complete, and, still yelling like a fiend, the dare-devil scout leaped upon the back of one of the flying mustangs, just as the enraged savages came running up.

"Hurrah!" he yelled, defiantly, as he disappeared in the gloom. "Yer euchered, red-skins. Take ther compliments ov Ole Lightning'."

The sharp crack of his weapon followed his taunting cry, and, although the shot was fired at hazard, one of the foremost warriors fell with the deadly bullet buried in his brain.

Filling the air with yells of rage, the Comanches ran in pursuit of their flying property, and the daring white man who had so boldly entered their camp.

The scout noted this with feelings of elation.

The further he led the red skins away from the camp, the easier it would be for his friend, Hurricane Kit, to effect the rescue of the two captives.

As for himself, mounted as he was, it was an easy matter for him to elude the savages, at the same time keeping the stampeded herd in motion, and the old scout chuckled with glee as he witnessed the strenuous efforts of his red-skinned foes.

But the hunter laughed too soon!

The mustang he bestrode had been rapidly approaching the stream, and now the animal slipped upon the bank and fell, throwing Old Lightning far out into the water!

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE TIMBER.

MEANWHILE, Hurricane Kit had not been idle.

After the scout left him upon his perilous mission, he lay low in his covert, keeping a vigilant watch upon the Indian camp and impatiently waiting to carry out his part of the programme.

The minutes dragged by on leaden wings.

After the scout had entered the stream, he was lost sight of by Kit, but the latter could judge how long it would take to reach the mustangs.

Therefore, when, in his opinion, sufficient time had elapsed, the youth left his covert and quietly made his way to the water's edge.

Drawing his revolvers, he held them elevated above the water that they might not get wet, and then, wading out, he turned upon his back, and using his feet, swam noiselessly across the stream.

Scarcely had he reached the bank, when wild yells and the snorting of horses told him that his friend, Old Lightning, was already at work.

"Just in time!" was Kit's mental exclamation, as he drew himself upon the bank.

Secreted behind a fringe of bushes, he eagerly surveyed the scene.

He could see the Indians as they started up in alarm and rushed off, and could hear the hoarse cries of the daring scout as he stampeded the mustangs.

In their surprise and confusion, the Comanches left their two prisoners totally unguarded, and Hurricane Kit smiled grimly as he noted this.

This was his time, and without an instant of delay, he began making his way in the direction of the camp.

He advanced rapidly, for there was no need of much caution, and in three minutes was beside the surprised and delighted captives.

Without a word, Kit bent over the girl, severed the thongs that bound her, and assisted her to her feet.

As he did so he heard a loud commotion, and looking up, he saw a portion of the red-skins returning at full speed.

Black Fox, the cunning chief of the Comanches, after the first few minutes of excitement, had suspected what was on foot.

So, leaving most of his warriors to pursue the mustangs and the dare-devil scout, the chief, with the remainder, turned back to guard his captives.

The red-skin leader was quick to see that his suspicions were correct, for in the radius of light cast by the fire he beheld Hurricane Kit in the act of liberating his precious captive, beautiful Laura Langdon.

Kit was not slow to comprehend that he was discovered, and, quickly releasing Fred Fairfax, he thrust his knife into the young man's hand, and bidding him follow, seized the maiden in his strong arms as though she was but a child, and vanished in the darkness.

Fred Fairfax was confused by the suddenness with which things had taken place, but he heard the words of his deliverer, and, after an instant's hesitation, he started to follow.

But before he had progressed a dozen feet, he tripped in the long grass, and fell heavily to the earth.

Ere he could rise, the red-skins were upon him.

Undaunted by the heavy odds against him, the brave young fellow fought desperately, dealing desperate blows to the right and left.

So fierce were his struggles that, for a moment, it seemed that he would break from his foes, but then he received a blow on the head that caused him to sink back, half-stunned, whereupon he was speedily overpowered.

Meanwhile, Hurricane Kit, clasping Laura Langdon in his arms, was racing through the grass at the top of his speed.

He could hear his pursuers a short distance

behind, though he could not see them, and he judged there were about a dozen chasing him.

The situation of the youth was far from pleasant.

Had he been alone, he could easily have slipped his enemies in the darkness, but he now had a weak, almost helpless girl in his charge, and this made escape all the more difficult.

Kit was not slow to see that it would require extraordinary cunning on his part, burdened as he was, to elude the human bloodhounds upon his trail.

But he was determined that the lovely girl in his arms should never be recaptured by her fiendish foes as long as he had strength to protect her.

With anxious eyes, the young adventurer looked about him.

At one side lay a belt of timber, and, seeing a chance for escape, he plunged into it without hesitation.

The timber was made up for the most part of young saplings, interlaced with mesquites, which, together with other thorny shrubs and vines, made in some places almost insurmountable barriers.

The surface of the ground was rough and uneven, while fallen trees and bowlders were numerous.

Seemingly, the foot of man had never before trodden there, and, as may be imagined, locomotion was exceedingly difficult.

Hurricane Kit pushed determinedly on, however, forcing his way through the dense undergrowth, unmindful of the thorns that lacerated his hands and face.

Stumbling over logs and bowlders, plunging blindly through the mesquites, the young man pressed resolutely on with the fair maiden, who, speechless from terror, lay passive in his strong arms without uttering a word.

On he went, until fairly within the heart of the woody labyrinth; then he turned abruptly to the left, pursuing a course at right-angles to his former one.

Hurricane Kit thus progressed a short distance, and then came to a standstill, judging that he had gone far enough for his purpose.

Right before him was a place curious in its formation. The ground was slightly elevated, forming a small hillock, which was strewn with loose rocks of various sizes. At the top these bowlders formed a rude breastwork in the shape of a circle, and a quantity of bushes, springing up from among the rocks, aided in making the barrier more insurmountable.

Within this natural fortress a determined man well armed might keep at bay a considerable number of savages and Hurricane Kit at once saw the wisdom of taking refuge there for the present.

It took him but a moment to reach the inside with the rescued maiden.

"There!" he exclaimed, with a sigh of relief. "We've had a hard run for it, miss, but I reckon we're all right now. We'll remain here for a while, for I hope the Comanches will give up hunting for us and return to their camp."

Too full of fright and excitement for utterance, Laura Langdon sunk breathlessly upon the earth beside her bold young rescuer.

Kit's first act was to see that his revolvers were ready for use, and then, having ascertained that the weapons were in proper condition, he leaned over the rocky parapet and watched for his enemies.

He could hear the Comanches signaling to one another from various directions; this told him that the savages had suspected that the fugitive would try to double on them, and had accordingly spread out through the timber to prevent such a course.

Hurricane Kit smiled grimly, as he listened to the signals of the Indians.

"The red-skinned rascals are bound to get me," he remarked, mentally. "But whether they will or not remains to be seen. The chances are even that they will pass by this place, without noticing it, and, even if they do discover us, I reckon there'll be a hot reception ready for 'em. They'll have to do some hard fighting in order to take me."

Feeling quite secure and at his ease in his new position, he lay stretched out behind the breastwork of rocks, keeping a sharp lookout for danger.

Only a few moments had passed, when scattering rain-drops began to fall—a token of what was to follow.

"Jerusalem!" was Kit's muttered exclamation. "Old Lightning was right when he said we were going to have a storm. Here it comes!"

As he spoke, the storm burst in all its fury, coming on with a suddenness that is one of the characteristics of the Southwestern tempest.

The rain fell in torrents, and the wind howled and raged through the tree-tops, while ever and anon, the thunder rolled and crashed in the heavens, and vivid flashes of lightning rendered everything for the instant as bright as day.

Luckily for Laura, there was a sheltered spot beneath an overhanging bowlder in the lee of the wind, and, crouching behind this, she was in a great measure protected from the drenching rain.

As for Hurricane Kit, he was speedily soaked to the skin, but he did not mind that as long as he kept his revolvers dry.

At first, he entertained some hope that the Comanches would abandon the hunt while the tempest was raging so fiercely; but here he was disappointed, for the signals still continued at regular intervals.

In reality, the savages were benefited by the storm, for the lightning would aid them in discovering those for whom they were in search.

Crouching low behind the rocks, Hurricane Kit watched patiently for signs of the enemy.

The signals came from all sides, showing that the Comanches were making a careful search, but as yet none of the savages had approached near to their place of concealment.

Suddenly, however, the youth thought he heard a light footstep just outside.

Breathlessly he waited, straining his eyes to penetrate the dense gloom.

The sound was not repeated, and Kit began to think that he was mistaken—that it was simply the sounds of the storm that he had heard.

But he was immediately undeceived.

An instant later a blinding flash lit up the

scene, and by its vivid light Hurricane Kit saw a painted Comanche warrior crouching upon the ground, his basilisk-like orbs fixed upon the heap of rocks above.

The discovery was so sudden and unexpected that Kit started back, with difficulty suppressing the cry of surprise that rose to his lips.

Had the Indian discovered him?

Anxiously he waited, but a moment passed without a sound from the red-skin below, and the youth concluded that he had not been seen.

The next flash revealed the savage in a position several feet nearer to the rocks.

He was now at the very base of the hillock, with his eyes still turned upward, and Kit was not slow to divine his intentions.

The warrior's suspicions had been aroused, and he was creeping up to examine the place, thinking that the fugitives might be hiding there.

What could be done?

That was the question revolved in Kit's mind, as he saw the bold savage mounting into their hiding-place.

It was plain that the red-skin must not be allowed to reach the top; but how was he to be silenced?

A bullet would have settled the warrior for good, but the report of the weapon would reach the ears of the Comanches, and bring the whole party down upon them.

True, he could wait until the brave's head appeared, and then give him the benefit of his bowie, but Kit determined upon a different mode of attack.

His foe was now climbing up the rocks, and, knowing that further delay would be dangerous, the daring youth leaped to his feet and threw himself upon the warrior beneath.

He landed squarely upon the broad back of the Comanche, with a force that would have knocked the breath out of most savages, and the red-skin, torn from his hold, rolled to the base of the hillock, taking his assailant with him.

But now Hurricane Kit found that he had caught a Tartar.

The warrior was both large and muscular, and, though confused and astonished at the sudden onset, he grappled fiercely with his foe.

Kit soon saw that the task of subduing the Comanche was much more difficult than he had imagined, but, nothing daunted, he "pitched into" the red-skin with a vengeance.

Upon the ground the two combatants rolled, neither uttering a sound, but each straining every nerve to overcome the other.

Five minutes passed, and still the struggle continued, neither Kit nor the Indian seeming to gain any advantage.

Then the warrior, who chanced to be uppermost, made a tremendous effort and broke from the youth's hold.

Gaining his feet, he whipped out his knife, and darted upon his prostrate young foe, triumph gleaming in his snaky eyes.

Kit had no time to rise, and the next moment the deadly weapon would have been sheathed in his body, had not the warrior tripped over a projecting rock.

He fell heavily to the earth, and Hurricane

Kit was upon him instantly, his own knife drawn ready for use.

But the savage lay motionless in a pool of blood. In his frantic efforts to recover his equilibrium, he had been impaled upon his own weapon.

Hurricane Kit, none the worse for his rough experience, lost no time in returning to where Laura was anxiously awaiting the result of the combat.

A low cry of joy and relief escaped her lips, as she beheld her brave young deliverer returning uninjured.

The youth was in a fever of anxiety, lest the Comanches, attracted by the sound of the late struggle, would come upon the scene; but the minutes passed in silence, and he was convinced that his fears on that score were groundless.

Half an hour passed, and the signals of the Indians ceased.

It was evident that they had abandoned the search and returned to their camp, and Kit deemed it safe to leave the retreat.

He was anxious to get as far as possible from the camp, for he knew that the Comanche would follow as soon as it was light enough to find the trail.

With the maiden by his side, he made his way through the timber, and soon succeeded in reaching the open country beyond.

Nothing was heard of the red-skins, and they continued their way, guided by the broad flashes that almost incessantly illuminated their path.

The rain was still falling in torrents, driven by the wind directly into the faces of the two fugitives, making their progress all the more difficult.

Most girls would have broken down in despair in the face of so many dangers and hardships, but Laura Langdon did not utter a word of complaint, traveling over the rough trail with a pluck and endurance that aroused the admiration of her companion, who cheered her on with low words of hope and encouragement.

In this way almost an hour was passed; but suddenly Hurricane Kit started back with a cry, as a number of dark forms sprung up in front of him.

Before he could draw a weapon, he was pounced upon and hurled violently to the earth.

CHAPTER IX.

DODGING THE FOE.

WHEN Old Lightning, the scout, found himself hurled from the back of the frightened mustang into the stream, he did not allow his presence of mind to leave him.

He struck the water head-first and immediately disappeared below the surface.

Instead of rising again, however, he took several long, powerful strokes which carried him across the stream.

When he rose to the surface he found himself upon the opposite shore, under the reeds and bushes that fringed the bank.

The old scout knew that the Comanches had witnessed his fall and would speedily be upon the spot; he was also well aware of the fact

that the enraged red-skins would spare no pains to find him, that they might wreak summary vengeance for the injuries he had inflicted upon them.

The name of Old Lightning was well-known to the Comanches, who cordially hated as well as feared the daring scout, and they had many old scores to settle with him, to say nothing about the work of the past few minutes.

Scarcely had the veteran concealed himself under the overhanging bushes when the Indians rushed up to the spot where he had been unhorsed.

Part of them kept on after the stampeded mustangs, while the remainder paused to look for the white scout.

Of course they saw nothing of him, but they knew that he must be in the stream, for he had not had time to land.

Accordingly, they spread along the shore in either direction, sharply watching the water for the scout, whom they thought to be swimming up or down the stream.

A brief but thorough search, however, showed that they were mistaken, and then the thought occurred to them that the hunter might be hiding in the bushes under the bank.

Immediately they went to work to examine the shore nearest to them.

Old Lightning, from his place of concealment could hear the guttural accents of his enemies as they conversed in low tones, although he could not see the savages themselves.

However, the desire to see what the red-skins were about overcame his caution, and he carefully parted the vines; through the opening thus made, he commanded a good view of the opposite shore.

The Indians were then busily engaged in searching the bank, and the way in which they went to work was both thorough and systematic.

One savage went up the stream for a short distance, while another went down; then the two advanced toward each other, examining the shore as they came.

Every bush, every clump of reeds was closely scrutinized; nothing that could possibly conceal a man escaped the sharp eyes of the Comanche trailers.

Meanwhile, the object of their search was watching the proceedings from his hiding-place.

"Hunt away, old copper-skins!" he muttered, with a grim chuckle. "Ye hain't got ther ole man yet."

The two trailers came together, their search having, of course, failed to bring to light the cunning white man.

Gathered upon the bank, the savages held a short consultation.

They spoke so low that the scout could not catch the words, though he strained his ears to do so. However, he soon knew the results, for two of the red-skins dropped into the water and swam across, one above and the other below the spot where he was concealed.

They were about to search the other bank.

As Old Lightning perceived this, the confident smile that he had hitherto worn died

quickly away, and in its place came an expression of mingled anxiety and doubt.

His position was a desperate one, to say the least.

The savages lined the opposite shore, and he could not crawl out of the water without being seen, for the stream at this point was only about ten yards wide; neither could he swim back to the other side for the same reason.

To move from his position meant certain discovery, and, on the other hand, if he remained where he was, he would eventually be found by one of the keen-eyed couple on the bank.

Old Lightning was in a dilemma.

It was the most ticklish position in which he, with years of experience, had ever been placed.

Yet, with discovery and capture seeming inevitable, the veteran did not lose his presence of mind; but remained as cool as the proverbial cucumber.

He was determined to resist capture to the last, and his brain was busily at work, thinking of some scheme by which he might escape detection.

Suddenly his fertile brain struck upon a trick, desperate and uncertain, but it was his last resort, and he compressed his lips firmly as he muttered to himself:

"It's a mighty ticklish move, but I'll try it, for it's my only chance. If I fail, then I'm a gone coon; but if I succeed, thar's still a chance of slippin' out o' this infernal nest o' hornets."

As motionless as a statue the desperate hunter floated under the bushes, supporting himself by clutching a projecting snag.

Only his head was above water, and he scarcely dared breathe for fear of being heard.

Several minutes elapsed, and the scout felt rather than knew, that one, at least, of the red-skins was close to his hiding-place.

An instant of eager listening convinced him that such was indeed the case, and that the savage who was coming up the stream would reach the spot before the other warrior.

With difficulty suppressing his excitement, Old Lightning waited.

An instant later the bushes next to him were raised, and the painted face of the Comanche warrior peered down into the water; then the bushes dropped into place again, as the red-skin released his hold.

The next moment those that screened the scout would be pulled aside.

The time for prompt and energetic action had arrived.

Inhaling a long breath, Old Lightning released his grasp on the snag, and sunk silently below the surface, just as the bushes over his head were pulled aside.

A ripple marked the spot where the scout went down, but it was so slight as to escape the notice of the red trailer, who, with a grunt of dissatisfaction, moved on, utterly unconscious of what had just taken place beneath his very nose.

Keeping below the surface, the scout permitted himself to be carried down the stream with the current.

When at length obliged to come to the surface for breath, he found himself still close to the

shore, about twenty yards below the point where he had so successfully dodged his foes.

Chuckling inwardly at the success of his cunning trick, the veteran anchored himself among the reeds, and continued to watch the movements of his enemies.

Having completed their examination of the stream, the Comanches, baffled and angry, gathered on the bank for further consultation.

What their next move would have been is only a matter of conjecture, for the next moment yells and sounds of confusion came from the direction of the camp.

The Indians immediately abandoned their hunt for Old Lightning, and darted away to have a part in the new trouble, which was caused by Hurricane Kit's dashing attempt to rescue the captives.

No sooner was the coast clear than the wily scout crawled upon the bank, chuckling grimly at the cunning manner in which he had outwitted his foes.

At once he proceeded to wring the water from his clothes, and to dry and reload his revolvers, which had by no means been benefited by his long immersion.

This done, Old Lightning felt himself in readiness for another scrimmage with his hated enemies.

For a moment he listened to the noises that rose from the vicinity of the Comanche camp.

It was plain that Hurricane Kit had attempted to carry out his part, and had been discovered by the red-skins.

Had he succeeded in releasing the prisoners, or had he been frustrated?

Perhaps he, himself, had fallen into the hands of the savages.

Such were the thoughts that agitated the mind of Old Lightning, and he was determined to ascertain the true condition of affairs, and be on hand to help his comrade if his assistance was needed.

He made his way cautiously up the stream, until he was directly opposite the camp-fire.

Scarcely had he reached this position when the storm, which had for some time been threatening, burst in all its fury.

The rain, descending in broad pelting sheets, speedily extinguished the fire, and the plain was wrapped in a dense gloom, relieved only by the glare of the lightning.

Old Lightning uttered a grunt of disgust as the rain was dashed into his face, with a force that almost took away his breath.

But there was no help for it, and the scout resolutely faced the driving blast.

In order to ascertain how matters really were he must gain a position close to the red-skins, and, hazardous though such a move might be, Old Lightning did not linger an instant before starting.

The risk he ran and the danger he incurred were but secondary considerations to the bold, daring hunter.

Recrossing the stream he sunk upon his hands and knees, and crawled rapidly, yet noiselessly, toward the savages.

Guided by the lightning, which revealed to him the ground beyond, he advanced straight

up, until only about ten yards separated him from the Indians.

Stopping under the shelter of a clump of bushes the scout waited for the next flash to show him the position of his enemies.

It came, and Old Lightning saw that the red-skins numbered about half a dozen, and they were gathered around Fred Fairfax, who lay, bound hand and foot, upon the ground.

The scout expressed his satisfaction by an inward chuckle.

"Things are better than I thought," he muttered. "Kit has cut loose the gal an' tuk to the woods with her, an' part ov the red varmints are after 'em hot-footed, fur I kin hear 'em yelling over yonder. But I reckon ther boy'll give 'em the slip an' get off all right, fur boss Injuns are no good when ye get 'em in the woods. Sure enough, this chap hyar is still in a pickle an' must be got out, but I opine that Old Lightning is equal ter ther occasion."

However, it was not such an easy matter to liberate the prisoner, for the guards were close beside him, and it was impossible to get much nearer without detection.

The scout was tempted to shoot down one of the red-skins and then rush boldly in upon the remainder, trusting to the suddenness of the assault to accomplish his purpose.

But, upon careful consideration, he rejected the plan as being both rash and uncertain.

Crouching behind the bushes the scout waited.

Presently, the party that had been scouring the timber in quest of Hurricane Kit and the maiden, was heard returning.

The scout awaited their arrival with considerable anxiety, for his friend might possibly have fallen into their hands.

But he was soon relieved from further anxiety on that score, for the Indians were without the couple whom they had been hunting so vigorously for.

"Good enuff!" chuckled Old Lightning. "Kit has lit out with the gal, an' now there's ther young chap yonder. Soon's I git him off all right, then our work hyar'll be complete."

The Comanches had gathered in a group, a few feet away from the spot where Fred Fairfax was lying.

Black Fox, the chief, was furious at what had occurred that night.

The loss of his mustangs and several warriors was bad enough, but to be deprived of the beautiful, sunny-haired maiden upon whom he had set his savage heart was too much to bear, and the doughty chieftain fairly danced in his rage.

Gesticulating wildly, he excitedly harangued his warriors.

Old Lightning did not catch the words he uttered, for they were drowned by the roar of the tempest; besides, he did not care a continental what the chief was saying, his whole mind being centered upon the rescue of the red-skins' captive.

The gaze of the Comanche warriors was directed upon their chief, and, for the time, their prisoner was forgotten.

The watchful scout was quick to observe this opportunity, and he immediately seized upon it.

Placing his knife between his teeth, he crawled out from his covert, and sinking upon his stomach, he advanced slowly and noiselessly toward young Fairfax.

There were only a few yards of ground to pass over, but every step was fraught with deadly danger.

Frequent electric flashes made objects as plain as day, and should one of the savages chance to look that way at this critical period, discovery was certain.

And if discovered, his designs would be frustrated, and only a desperate fight would save himself from capture.

Steadily, foot by foot, he advanced like some huge serpent, and still he remained undiscovered.

At last he was at the side of the youth.

But now a new danger presented itself.

If he made known his presence too abruptly, the young man, in his surprise, might utter an exclamation that would reach the ears of the Indians, and thus ruin his whole plan.

For an instant Old Lightning hesitated, but he resolved to run the risk, and bending over Fred, he whispered softly in his ear.

"Hist! Don't make a sound, ef ye want ter escape. I'm a friend, an' I've come ter save ye," he said.

Fred Fairfax was possessed of great presence of mind, and though much astonished at hearing the voice of a white man close to his ears, the only sign he gave was a slight start of surprise.

"I'm going ter cut ye loose," continued the hunter, in the same guarded tones. "When you are free, crawl along after me, but be keeful not to make a noise. If ye do, yer goose is cooked, sure."

Fred indicated that he understood the directions of his friend, and the next moment the keen blade of the scout silently performed its work.

No sooner did he sever the cords that bound the youth, than the old veteran turned and noiselessly retreated in the same direction that Hurricane Kit had taken a short time before.

After going about twenty yards, he paused and waited for the youth to come up.

He had but a moment to wait, for Fred Fairfax had followed the scout with a skill and noiselessness that did him credit.

When he reached Old Lightning, he grasped his hand, impulsively.

"Your daring action has saved me from a terrible fate," he exclaimed, speaking low yet fervently. "I shall never forget—"

"Come, now!" interposed the scout, a little gruffly. "Drop that! This is no time fer sich rot. 'Tain't best ter shout till ye'r' out o' the woods. The red varmints 'll be after us soon, hot and heavy, mark my words!"

Hardly had the hunter ceased speaking, when a series of shouts from behind told that the savages had discovered that their prisoner was missing.

"Trowsers an' tomcats!" exclaimed Old Lightning, grimly. "Ther varmints hev tumbled to it so soon. Come on, pard! We must make a run for it."

Closely followed by his companion, the scout dashed into the timber, the yells of the Comanches ringing in their ears.

CHAPTER X.

FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH.

A FEW miles beyond the stream, on the bank of which Black Fox's band of Comanches had made their camp, was a narrow defile, which ran through the rough, mountainous region, walled in on both sides by huge boulders and basaltic buttes.

At one particular point, this canyon widened abruptly, and then dwindled again to its former dimensions, forming a grass-covered "pocket" amid the hills.

In this secluded nook, at the same time that the stirring scenes described in our last three chapters were being enacted, a band of men were congregated.

Under an overhanging rock, sheltered from the wind and rain, a fire was blazing cheerfully, and around this the men were gathered, while their horses were picketed a short distance away.

In the villainous, hard-looking faces congregated there, it were an easy matter to recognize the worthy members of Panther Dick's band of outlaws and cut-throats.

The burly leader himself was there, occupying the most sheltered place.

He was bending over a paper, which he scrutinized with interest, for it was the key to the discovery of the treasure-cavern, which he had wrested from the possession of Hurricane Kit among the Colorado mountains.

The brow of the outlaw chief was contracted into a frown of perplexity as he pondered over the curious map, with its labyrinth of figures and seemingly meaningless dots and zigzag lines.

Suddenly, however, his swarthy face seemed to brighten, and his dark eyes glittered with excitement as he called to his first lieutenant, a dark-skinned rascal whose native land was on the other side of the Rio Grande, and who was known among his brother-outlaws as Sonora Jose.

"Jose!" exclaimed Panther Dick, hoarsely. "I think that at last I have struck a clew to this infernal puzzle."

The eyes of the Mexican brightened.

"Good, senor!" he said, tersely.

Panther Dick went on:

"You see here, Jose, this crooked line running across the map near the top! Then here is a dotted line running almost at right-angles with the first and marked 5. It's my opinion that these two lines are the principal ones upon the map, and that to solve their meaning would be to acquire the key to the whole secret."

"At first I was puzzled, but now it seems to me as plain as day. That crooked line, I take it, represents a river, and as the stream which we crossed a while ago is the only one in this region, that must be the one that is meant."

"The dotted line shows the direction to be taken after crossing the river, and the figure represents the distance to be traveled, probably

in miles. Thus it would seem that we are not far from the cavern at the present time."

"You are right, senor captain," remarked Sonora Jose, who was listening eagerly to the revelations of his chief.

"However," continued Panther Dick, "here is proof more conclusive. After reaching the five-mile point, as I will term it, the general direction of the lines is to the left. They run in every conceivable direction, twisting and turning, and are marked with various numbers. With them I have not bothered my brains, for I believe most of them were placed there by the man who drew the map in order to mislead any one who might chance to obtain possession of it.

"I have reached the solution to the problem in a different way. You see here a circle, and there everything ends. Within that circle lies the treasure, to obtain which we have ridden so far. Now, Jose, what should that circle represent but this very pocket in which we are now encamped?"

As Panther Dick concluded he looked up in triumph at his lieutenant, who was regarding him with admiring eyes.

There was no denying the fact that the outlaw chief was a wonderful man; the way in which he had reasoned out his theory proved that.

Had he followed an honorable calling, Panther Dick would have made his mark in the world, for he possessed a powerful brain, was well-educated, and as brave as a lion; but he had chosen an evil life, going on from bad to worse, until he became notorious as one of the worst of the many outlaws and cut-throats that infest the mining regions of our great Western country.

"You see, Jose," went on the chief, after pausing a moment, "we have been lucky for once. Instead of spending days in tracing out the devious windings of the trail, as laid down upon the map, we have, without being aware of the fact, struck plump down upon the spot, which we might never have otherwise found. The devil is aiding his own for once.

"The cave which contains the treasure is, without a doubt, somewhere among these bowlders that line the pocket. As soon as daylight comes we will search for it. Hark! What's that?"

The long, mournful hoot of the mountain owl reached their ears above the roar of the storm.

"It's Jack's signal!" exclaimed the outlaw leader. "Something's in the wind. Go you, Red Sam, and see what the sentinel wants."

The ruffian designated sprang to his feet, and the next moment disappeared in the darkness.

Presently he returned.

"Well?" said Panther Dick, inquiringly.

"Jack says, cap'n," reported the outlaw, "that a couple ov persons are comin' up ther kenyon, an' he wants yer orders concerning 'em."

"The deuce you say!" growled the chief. "I reckon we can't afford to have any outsiders prowling about. Here, Jose, take a few men and lay for the intruders, whoever they may be. Lively, now!"

"Si, senor," answered the Mexican, who, with several burly fellows at his back, immediately darted away upon his mission.

The couple coming up the defile were Hurricane Kit and Laura Landon, and the runner has already seen how they were surprised and overpowered by the ambushed outlaws.

Panther Dick impatiently awaited the return of his lieutenant, and presently the latter made his reappearance.

"Well, how is it, Jose?" he demanded, eagerly. "Did you get them?"

"Si, senor!" replied Sonora Jose, showing his white teeth in an exultant smile. "We captured both of them and brought them in. One is a woman, while the other is a young man, I think. We could not see his face."

"Ha!" exclaimed the outlaw chief, excitedly. "A man and woman traveling alone in this wild country! Bring them here at once, Jose, that I may see what they look like."

A moment later the two captives were led into the presence of Panther Dick.

A gleam of admiration shot into his eyes as he looked upon the lovely girl before him, but when he turned his attention to the other prisoner, he started back with a cry of astonishment, as did his men.

In the light of the fire, the face of Hurricane Kit was revealed to the outlaws for the first time, and they were as much startled as if a thunderbolt had suddenly dropped down in their midst.

Here was the identical youth whom they had left several hundred miles away, in a position from which the chances were ten to one he could not escape.

At first, the chief could hardly believe the evidence of his own eyes, but a moment's careful scrutiny convinced him that this was no remarkable resemblance, but the very same person whom he had fiendishly left bound to the tree to die.

How the youth had managed to escape was a question that bothered Panther Dick, who after staring in speechless amazement at Kit for fully a minute, finally demanded:

"Where in blazes did you come from, youngster? I thought I had effectually disposed of you, but now you turn up again like a bad penny. How in thunder did you get away, anyhow?"

Hurricane Kit deigned not to reply, but faced the outlaw defiantly.

Panther Dick laughed loudly.

"Ha, ha! Sulky, eh?" he exclaimed. "Well, I dare say we can find a way of subduing your stubborn spirit, my young gamecock. Here, Jose, take him away. Guard him well, for if he escapes your life will pay the forfeit. In the morning we will find a way to dispose of him."

Kit was led away to another part of the pocket, where he was vigilantly guarded, while Laura was, by the orders of the chief, taken to the most sheltered nook to be found, she, too, being closely watched.

Panther Dick had obtained a prize in the form of his fair captive, and he was determined not to lose her.

"The devil is aiding his own, and no mis-

take," he soliloquized. "Here I have one of the prettiest girls in existence in my power, and to-morrow, after getting rid of that meddling young cub, I'll strike for the trapper's treasure. When we get that, I'll take my share and light out for Denver with my fair young bride, for mine she shall be by fair means or foul."

While the outlaw chief was thus pondering and arranging his diabolical plans, Hurricane was also deeply buried in thought.

It was exasperating, after having so neatly outwitted the Comanches, to fall into the hands of the outlaws, who were no more merciful than their red foes.

Instead of benefiting the girl, he had led her unwittingly into a position equally as hopeless as the first.

Yet, in spite of his desperate situation, the bold young adventurer was still undaunted.

He knew that his stanch old pard, Old Lightning, would be following his trail, and if the bold hunter discovered his friend's position, he would be prompt to strike a blow in his behalf.

On the old scout, therefore, everything depended, but Kit was confident that the morrow would find his brave pard "on deck."

The minutes dragged slowly by, and as the hours of that eventful night grew less, the storm gradually decreased in violence.

At last came daylight, and the sun smiled down upon the little mountain pocket and its occupants.

The outlaws were early astir, and the chief himself came strolling over to the spot where his prisoner was lying upon the earth.

"Ah, good-morning, my friend!" he exclaimed, with mock civility. "How do you find yourself, this fine morning?"

Kit made no reply to the question of the outlaw chief, not even looking up; but Panther Dick, not in the least abashed by his cool reception, went on:

"You are looking finely, my young rooster, but you seem to be in need of exercise. Therefore, I shall humanely liberate your feet, and give you a chance to dance upon nothing before yonder sun is half an hour higher. How does that prospect suit you?"

A contemptuous smile curled the lip of the helpless youth, as he heard the taunting words of his foe, but he still remained cool and silent.

"You're a daring chap, I'll allow," continued the bandit, "but you've nearly reached the end of your rope. You have come here after the hidden treasure, dogging our trail, hoping to thwart us, but there's where you got sadly left. This region is not large enough for us both, therefore, you must leave it. The time is near at hand, Hurricane Kit, when you will curse yourself for having been such a fool as to buck against Panther Dick."

And as he uttered these ominous words, the outlaw chief turned and walked away from the spot.

"Sonora Jose," he said to his lieutenant, "have a rope rigged over a limb of yonder tree."

"Si, senor!"

"But stay, Jose," continued Panther Dick, as the Mexican was about to hurry off. "I think of a better plan than that. Bring out one of

the kegs of powder that we brought with us. I reckon we'll never find a better use for it. Hurry!"

The Mexican was off in an instant.

At the edge of the pocket was a large, flat-topped rock, about ten feet high, and close beside it grew a tree, the branches of which spread over the top of the boulder.

At the foot of this tree was placed the keg of gunpowder.

Then, by orders of the outlaw chief, Hurricane Kit was led forth.

The youth was made to stand upon the powder-keg, with his back against the trunk of the tree, to which he was securely lashed by a long, stout rope of deer-skin passing around his body and limbs.

Then a hole was made in the side of the keg, from which a tiny train of gunpowder was laid.

Hurricane Kit was no longer ignorant of the doom intended for him.

The fiendish bandits were about to fire the powder, and blow him into eternity.

Yet, in spite of the terrible fate that awaited him, Kit did not quail.

Even in this hour of deadly danger, the firm, undaunted spirit of the youth was made manifest.

Coolly he watched the movements of the outlaws, while his handsome face wore a look of defiance.

With his face as stern as Fate itself, Panther Dick directed the movements of his men; the devilish, exultant gleam in his eyes showed that there was no mercy in his heart.

The train was soon completed, and then the bandits discreetly retired to a safer position, leaving one man to fire the train.

This was quickly done, and as the outlaw scampered to a place of safety, a tongue of flame darted over the powder toward the doomed youth.

It was a critical moment, and the life of Hurricane Kit hung by a hair!

CHAPTER XI.

OLD LIGHTNING ON DECK.

STUMBLING over rocks and fallen trees, forcing their way through the dense thickets, bleeding from deep scratches received from contact with thorns and briers, Old Lightning and Fred Fairfax dashed recklessly through the belt of timber.

The intrepid scout led the way, halting for nothing, and young Fairfax kept close at his heels.

Hardly had they buried themselves in the dense shadows of the forest, when the Comanches came crashing into the undergrowth in pursuit, their demoniac yells forming a fitting accompaniment to the peals of thunder that frequently shook the earth.

"Trowsers an' tomcats! Hear ther varmints howl," exclaimed the hunter, with a grim chuckle. "They're after us, red-hot, an' I opine we'll hev ter do a neat bit o' runnin', or ther red imps 'll nab us. Confound these bushes!"

"I hardly feel like running, after being tied up all night," said Fred. "Ha! what's that?"

Something whizzed by within six inches of his head as he spoke, and lodged in the trunk of a tree right ahead.

"Arrers!" remarked Old Lightning, coolly. "The varmints are peggin' away fur all they're worth. Well, let 'em peg."

A moment passed, and the arrows flew viciously about our two friends, though, fortunately, neither were hit.

"Trowsers an' tomcats!" growled the old scout, as one of the feathery shafts hurtled by his ear, taking away a lock of hair in its passage. "This 'ere is gittin' a leetle too close fer comfort. Hyar, take this weepson an' try a shot on 'em, jest ter let 'em know we mean biz. Blast ther copper-hided rascal!"

Fairfax seized the revolver, and watched for an opportunity to use it.

Presently a vivid flash revealed the pursuing savages, and the youth, halting for a moment, fired back upon them.

The shot was fired hastily, and almost at random, but, nevertheless, the bullet was not wasted; the leaden pellet lodged in the painted breast of one of the foremost red-skins, who threw up his arms and fell, uttering a dismal howl that was caught up and re-echoed by his furious comrades.

"Good shot!" cried Old Lightning, as he noted the effect. "Try another, pard."

Fairfax did so at the very next opportunity offered, but this time the bullet flew wide of its mark.

However, the third time he was more fortunate, for a brawny warrior abruptly sought the earth, shot through the brain.

"Now's our time!" cried the scout, noting the fact that the Indians were beginning to hesitate. "We must make a rousin' ole spurt, an' leave 'em in ther lurch. Fire two or three shots as fast as ye kin pull trigger, an' then foller me as lively as yer legs kin carry ye."

Fred Fairfax promptly obeyed the instructions of the hunter, emptying the chambers of the revolver into the advancing Comanches, who, confused by the hailstorm of bullets, came to a standstill; then he turned and followed Old Lightning, who was already bounding through the timber like a frightened stag.

The old scout made a magnificent spurt, running with a speed that was astonishing, considering the many things that impeded locomotion; and young Fairfax, young and supple though he was, found it extremely difficult to keep near him.

For fully five minutes did Old Lightning keep up that headlong dash; then he slackened speed and allowed his companion, puffing and blowing, to come up with him.

"I reckon that'll do," he remarked, as Fred reached his side. "We've gained a leetle on ther varmints. Now, foller me!"

As he spoke the scout darted away, turning sharply to the right, and Fairfax followed close behind.

Away through the timber sped Old Lightning, twisting and turning in every direction.

For fully ten minutes he kept up this zigzag course, his object being to throw the red-skins off the trail; then he came to a halt and listened attentively.

The cries of the Comanches now came from the left, and were rapidly becoming fainter.

"Trowsers an' tomcats!" exclaimed the old veteran, a broad grin overspreading his rugged countenance. "We hev played it on ther copper-skins, an' no mistake."

"It looks like it," rejoined Fred Fairfax. "What shall we do now, friend?"

"Find our way out o' this infernal place," said Old Lightning, tersely. "Then, when it's light enuff, we'll hunt fer Kit an' ther gal."

"And can we find them, do you think?" demanded the young man, anxiously.

"Find 'em! Trowsers an' tomcats, yes! They cum straight this way, and it will be an easy matter ter lift their trail."

While speaking, the two had been pushing forward as rapidly as possible, and it was not long ere they emerged from the timber upon the open ground.

The gray light of morning was already appearing in the East, and the scout instantly began his search for some traces of his pard.

It did not take long for his sharp eyes to detect the imprints of feet upon the soil, and bending over, he examined them attentively.

The prints were of two different sizes, one being small and delicate, made without doubt by a woman, and Old Lightning at once knew that he had discovered the trail of his friends.

Without loss of time the two men started; the scout led the way, following the trail with unerring accuracy, while Fred Fairfax kept close behind, eager to find the maiden for whom he had begun to feel a more than ordinary attachment.

For nearly an hour they pressed on, without seeing anything of Hurricane Kit or Laura.

Suddenly Old Lightning dropped to the ground as if shot, quickly dodging behind a convenient clump of bushes, and motioning his companion to do the same.

Fred Fairfax instantly followed the scout's example.

"What's the matter?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Matter enuff," returned Old Lightning, in the same guarded tones. "Jest cast yer peepers up the trail yonder."

The youth did so, and uttered a low cry of surprise.

A man was seated upon the ground a short distance away, with his back against a convenient bowlder, coolly puffing a cigar.

It was no other than the outlaw sentinel.

"He's a white man, so it's all right," said Fred Fairfax, who was ignorant of the presence of the bandits in that region.

"Not by a durned sight it ain't," growled Old Lightning, clutching his young companion as the latter was about to rise. "Lay low, I tell yer. Yonder chap is a member of ther worst gang o' cut-throats in ther kentry, an' his comrades can't be fur off."

Young Fairfax looked up, a startled expression in his eyes.

"Great Heavens!" he whispered. "If that is so, our friends must have run straight in upon them."

"Exactly!" assented the old scout. "Kit has fallen into a trap neat's a whistle. It's a case o' jumpin' from the fryin'-pan inter ther

fire. Trowsers an' tomcats! We must go ter work, an' lively, too, if we want ter save 'em, fur that Panther Dick is a devil, an' no mistake. Thar's no tellin' what he might take it into his head ter do."

"I am anxious to begin," exclaimed Fred, eagerly. "What is the first move?"

"To dispose of yonder sentry," replied Old Lightning, grimly.

"Humph! An easy matter, that!" and the youth touched his pistol significantly as he spoke.

But the scout shook his head decidedly.

"T'won't do," he said. "The report would alarm the outlaws. It must be done silently, and ye kin depend on ther ole man for thet. It won't be ther first guard, red or white, that he has disposed of."

Old Lightning carefully scanned for a moment the ground between them and the outlaw sentinel.

"I have it!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Jest you stay hyar under cover, an' keep yer optics on the guard. I'm a-goin' ter rope in that chap or bu'st a tryin'."

So saying, he crept away and disappeared among the bushes.

Fred Fairfax had the most implicit confidence in his newly-found friend, the scout, and, controlling his impatience with an effort, he awaited the result of Old Lightning's scheme.

The trail was fringed with rocks and bushes, and at the base of one of the former the outlaw was seated.

Five minutes passed, and then young Fairfax gave vent to a low exclamation of surprise, for he suddenly beheld the old hunter appear upon the top of the very boulder against which the bandit was leaning.

Cautiously Old Lightning advanced to the edge and looked down upon the outlaw, who smoked serenely on, unconscious of the presence of a foe.

For an instant the scout stood there; then, with a panther-like spring, he launched himself upon the sentry.

A brief struggle followed, but the outlaw was half-stunned by the blow, and Old Lightning soon succeeded in choking him into a state of insensibility.

Then Fred came up, and, with his assistance, the bandit was securely bound and gagged, and then pitched unceremoniously into the bushes.

"So fur, good!" remarked Old Lightning, coolly. "Nuthin' prevents us now, from goin' inter ther outlaws' camp. Foller me, pard, an' don't make a sound that will betray us. No time should be lost."

In silence the two daring men advanced.

The old scout led the way among the scattered boulders, rapidly yet with due caution, while Fred followed close behind.

Ten minutes later they were looking down, from a secure position upon the ledges, into the inclosed pocket where Panther Dick's band of outlaws were encamped.

It was a startling scene that our two friends looked upon.

Several of the desperadoes were in the act of tying Hurricane Kit to the tree, at the foot of which the keg of powder was placed, while the

remainder of the band were grouped around in a state of eager expectancy.

The eyes of Old Lightning fairly blazed with fury, as he looked upon the scene.

Instantly he comprehended the diabolical intentions of the outlaws, and in a moment his plans were made.

"Pard!" he whispered, hoarsely. "We must work like chain-lightnin', er Kit'll be blown ter kingdom-cum' in less'n five minutes. Hump yerself over ter th' ledges on the o. her side o' ther pocket as quick as ye kin. Soon's ye git thar, open fire on the varmints, fast as ye kin pull trigger. That'll attract their attention, an' give me a chance ter jump down an' cut him loose. Hurry, now!"

"I understand!" said Fairfax, simply, and the next instant he was off.

Dropping upon his stomach, Old Lightning crawled nearer, until he was upon the flat top of the very rock against which grew the tree to which Hurricane Kit was secured.

As before stated, the branches of the tree overspread the boulder, affording an effective screen from the gaze of those below.

There crouched the daring scout, knife in hand, in readiness to leap to the ground below, as soon as his companion opened the ball.

The outlaws were busy laying the train, and Old Lightning looked anxiously for Fred Fairfax.

If the latter failed to reach his allotted position in time, Hurricane Kit was doomed, for, with the outlaws looking in that direction, it would be certain death for the scout to show himself.

A minute passed! The train was laid, the desperadoes retired to a safe distance, while one of them stepped out to fire the long, black line of powder.

Old Lightning clutched his knife nervously, as he cast an uneasy glance toward the opposite cliffs.

Fred Fairfax had not yet appeared.

Would he be too late?

CHAPTER XII.

BANDITS BAFFLED.

FRED FAIRFAX was on hand, however.

Just as the outlaw stooped to apply the match to the train, he appeared upon the ledge, and opened fire upon the desperadoes below.

He pulled trigger with the rapidity of lightning, and for a moment bullets flew like hail about the heads of the bandits.

The latter, surprised and confused by the sudden assault, looked for their assailants, forgetting their prisoner for the instant.

This was the opportunity looked for by Old Lightning, and he instantly leaped from the rock to the ground.

He landed squarely upon the train of powder, and one vigorous movement scattered it in every direction; the old scout was just in time, for in an instant more the fire would have reached the keg.

Quick as a flash, Old Lightning sprung to the side of Hurricane Kit.

A few rapid sweeps of the knife, and the youth was at liberty.

At this moment Panther Dick chanced to look in that direction.

He took in the situation at a glance, and a furious curse burst from his lips.

Old Lightning saw that he was discovered.

The outlaws were rushing toward him, and there was no time to reach the pass which led from the pocket.

However, the old hunter was equal to the emergency.

Bidding Kit to follow, he leaped to the tree, caught a convenient limb, and mounted like a cat.

Hurricane Kit was scarcely behind him, and, though cramped and sore from his recent confinement, he managed to climb to the top in a manner by no means slow.

They reached the summit of the rock just as the outlaws arrived at the base, and immediately a storm of bullets whistled viciously about their ears.

Old Lightning pressed his hand to his head, uttering a low cry of pain.

"Are you hit, pard?" demanded Kit.

"Only a scratch," answered the scout, lightly. "Ther imp who fired that shot meant well enuff, but he only clipped off a piece of my ear. Trowsers an' tomcats! This is a leetle too warm fer comfort."

The two made a dash, and succeeded in reaching the shelter of the rocks without further injury.

They were by no means out of danger, however, for the outlaws, furious at what had occurred, clambered in pursuit.

Our two friends ran at full speed; they had a slight start, and by dodging among the boulders, managed to keep out of range of the outlaws' pistols.

But the latter came on like so many wolves, with Panther Dick in the lead, determined to overtake their daring foes and wipe them out of existence.

Fleet of foot as were the fugitives, the outlaws were equally so, and our friends soon perceived that it was impossible to shake them off.

"Tell yer what it is, pard!" panted Old Lightning, as he tore along. "We've got ter make a stand somewhere an' fight for it. Keep y-r eyes peeled fer a good place."

A moment later a spot was espied, which seemed to be just the thing for the purpose.

A little to the left rose a lofty ledge, the side of which was exceedingly steep, and, with the exception of a few straggling bushes, entirely bare.

The top of this ledge was strewn with boulders, which formed a natural breastwork, behind which they might fire upon those below, and be secure from any bullets sent in return.

Hurricane Kit and Old Lightning espied this place simultaneously, and instantly they made a dash for it.

They reached the base of the elevation, and scrambled up the steep side, clinging to the outgrowing bushes.

At this moment the outlaws dashed into view; they immediately caught sight of the two fugitives.

In their present position, our friends present-

ed an excellent target, and instantly a storm of bullets whistled about their ears.

It was a miracle that they were not struck, but both seemed to wear charmed lives, and they reached the summit unscathed, much to the disgust of their pursuers.

"Now, then!" exclaimed Hurricane Kit, as they crouched behind the rocks. "Tit for tat! They've been peppering us all the way, and now we'll give 'em a dose of their own medicine."

"Trowsers and tomcats, yes!" assented the old scout, and rising up, they fired upon the bandits who were just below.

Each bullet found its mark, and the outlaw band was diminished by two.

Furious at the death of his men, Panther Dick ordered the survivors to charge.

With loud yells they advanced, and essayed to scale the height, but our friends, firm and undaunted, gave them such a warm reception that they quickly retreated, leaving two more of their number stretched upon the ground.

The desperadoes fell back behind the boulders, and Kit and Old Lightning seized this opportunity to reload their weapons.

"Trowsers an' tomcats!" grunted the old veteran, as he wiped the perspiration from his face. "That was red-hot while it lasted, but I reckon we give 'em a dose that they didn't relish from the way they skedaddled."

"Do you think they'll have the courage to try it again?"

"I'll allow that they will. Thet Panther Dick is jest a-b'ilin', an' nothin' short ov our scalps 'll satisfy him. Ye kin look for more fun presently."

"You're right, pard!" exclaimed Hurricane Kit. "Here they come, now."

As he spoke, the desperadoes emerged from their place of shelter and again advanced to the attack.

This time there was no shouting, and it was a noticeable fact that the ruffians followed their chief with considerable reluctance.

Old Lightning's sharp eyes noted this, and he gave vent to a low chuckle.

"Trowsers an' tomcats!" he muttered. "Ther pesky varmints are beginnin' ter show ther white feather a'ready. Brace up, pard! One rip-snortin' ole volley 'll settle 'em for good, I opine."

Up rushed the bandits with Panther Dick in advance.

The two treasure-seekers waited until their enemies were at the foot of the hill, then they rose up and the next instant the sharp rattle of their revolvers rung out upon the air.

A man went down at the first shot fired, but the outlaws, spurred on by their dashing leader, strove desperately to mount the steep incline.

Hurricane Kit singled out the tall form of Panther Dick, and, simultaneously with the crack of his pistol, the outlaw chief fell like a log.

That was the finishing stroke, for, dismayed by the fall of their leader, the bandits beat an immediate retreat.

Panther Dick, however, was far from being dead.

The bullet had grazed his temple, stunning

him for a moment, but now he leaped to his feet and rushed after his men.

Kit sent several shots after him, but he escaped unharmed.

"Confound the luck!" exclaimed the youth. "I thought I was sure of him that time, but there he goes, as lively as ever. His life must be charmed!"

"Not by a durned sight," said Old Lightning. "That feller's no more'n human, an' he'll reach there end ov his rope afore long. Anyhow, we've give ther scoundrels a durned good thrashin', an' if they toe the scratch ag'in, they've got more spunk than I give 'em credit for."

"I agree with you, pard. We have taught them a lesson they'll not forget in a hurry. However, it's well to be prepared, in case they do make another assault."

Accordingly, their weapons were once more carefully loaded ready for use, and, this done, our friends waited for the next movement on the part of the outlaws.

Meanwhile, the latter were gathered behind a sheltering rock, a short distance away.

Their ranks had been considerably reduced during the past half-hour, until now they numbered only seven besides the chief.

The latter was furious at the way he had been repulsed by his two daring foes, and he ordered his men to advance once more to the assault.

"They are armed only with revolvers," he said, "and their weapons would soon be emptied. Then one rush, and their capture is certain. On, boys!"

But not a man stirred.

Panther Dick glared fiercely at his men, who returned his look with one of sullen defiance.

"Thunder and lightning!" yelled the outlaw chief. "What do you mean? Why am I not obeyed?"

Sonora Jose stepped forward.

"You see, captain," he said firmly but respectfully, "we are but human, and it's sure death to attempt to scale yonder ledge in the face of such a murderous fire. Besides, we came here to get treasure, not to throw away our lives as we have been doing."

Panther Dick was furious at this show of insubordination on the part of his followers, but he saw that the men were in earnest, and realized that, with them turned against him, his chances in that region, surrounded by enemies, would be poor indeed. Besides, he could but admit that there was sound sense in the words of his lieutenant.

It was policy to keep his men with him, at any cost, so he suppressed his anger with a violent effort.

"You are right, Jose!" he exclaimed. "I was excited, and did not think of the result of such a rash move. Come! Let us return to the pocket. We'll find the treasure first, and hunt our foes afterward."

Accordingly, they turned their backs upon the scene of their bloody repulse, and made their way back to their camp.

As they drew near, Panther Dick suddenly thought of his fair captive, Laura Langdon; he had left her in a remote corner of the camp, so secured that she could not move from the spot,

yet the outlaw had a foreboding that all was not well.

As soon as he reached the pocket, he hurried to the spot where he had left the girl.

Once there he found his suspicions verified.

Laura Langdon was gone.

"How could she have escaped?" was the question Panther Dick asked himself.

Just then his gaze fell upon a piece of rope which lay upon the ground at his feet.

It was the same which had secured the girl, and, upon examination, the outlaw saw that it had been severed with a knife.

Then he remembered that some one among the rocks on the other side of the pocket had fired upon them just before the daring rescue of Hurricane Kit by Old Lightning.

Now the truth flashed into the outlaw's mind.

While he was in pursuit of his escaped prisoner this new-comer had descended into the camp and carried off the maiden in triumph.

Panther Dick was baffled once more, and, as may be imagined, this unwelcome discovery did not tend to improve his temper.

However, there was no help for it, and the chief at once commenced the search for the hidden treasure cave.

If the gold was found it would serve as an excellent balm for his ruffled spirit.

Panther Dick was confident that the entrance to the cavern was concealed somewhere among the heaps of rocks fringing the sides of the pocket, and it was here, therefore, that the hunt was made.

The bandits worked with a will, and they had ample reasons for so doing, for a fortune was at stake.

Every rock, every bush, was carefully examined, and at last, after nearly an hour had been spent in active search, one of the men rolled aside a large, flat rock resting upon one side, which was nearly concealed from view by the dense shrubbery around it.

By so doing a large, dark cavity in the bank was revealed to the gaze of the delighted gold-seekers.

Panther Dick leaped forward with a cry of triumph.

"Come on!" he shouted. "The cave is found at last. Hurrah for the trapper's treasure!"

CHAPTER XIII.

HOT WORK.

MEANWHILE Fred Fairfax had been by no means idle.

He had obeyed the directions of Old Lightning to the letter, and now as he beheld Hurricane Kit and the old scout disappear, closely pursued by the outlaws, he saw an excellent opportunity to do a piece of work on his own account.

He knew that Laura Langdon was confined somewhere in the camp, and the bandits in their haste had left her totally unguarded.

What was to prevent him from releasing the girl and flying with her to a place of safety?

Nothing! It was a golden opportunity, and the youth did not allow it to pass by unheeded.

Satisfied that the outlaws had fairly left the

camp, he immediately made his way down the precipitous side of the bluff.

Cautiously he picked his way among the rocks, and soon he stood within the inclosed valley.

Immediately Fred looked for the maiden, but the only living things he saw were the horses of the outlaws, quietly grazing at the other end of the camp.

However, the young man knew that she was concealed somewhere in the vicinity, and he commenced an eager search.

He would have called her name, but for fear that some of the bandits might yet be near by, and hear his voice.

However, he soon found the object of his search; she was lying upon the ground in a secluded nook, her hands and feet securely bound.

Fred Fairfax bounded forward with a glad cry, and the next instant Laura was released from her unpleasant position.

As may be imagined, the meeting between the young couple was tender in the extreme; yet, Fred did not allow his joy to get the better of his judgment.

He realized that the outlaws might return at any moment. Therefore, it was expedient that they should leave the dangerous place as quickly as possible.

The youth's gaze fell upon the outlaws' horses, and he instantly determined not to leave the place on foot, as long as such good mounts were obtainable.

Accordingly, he picked out the two best animals he could find, one of them being the outlaw chief's own horse.

The couple were speedily mounted, and two minutes later the camp was left behind.

Fred shaped his course up the trail in about the same direction as that taken by the desperadoes, hoping to soon fall in with his friends.

They rode slowly and cautiously, making as little noise as possible, and it was well that they did so.

They had not proceeded a great way, before some one was heard coming up the trail ahead of them.

Instantly the two fugitives came to a halt.

Noiselessly dismounting, young Fairfax seized the horses by the bits, and led them behind a large boulder that stood conveniently near.

They were just in time, for scarcely had they concealed themselves when the new-comers appeared.

They were no other than the remnant of Panther Dick's gang, returning from their unsuccessful pursuit of Hurricane Kit and the scout.

Fred Fairfax held his breath in anxiety as his enemies passed by, fearful lest the horses would make some sound that would betray their whereabouts.

But, to his great relief, the animals remained perfectly still, and the outlaws passed on, all unconscious of the proximity of the young couple.

As soon as the foot-falls of their foes were no longer audible, our friends remounted and continued their way.

It was evident to Fred that the bandits had failed in their attempt to capture his friends,

and he hoped to find them without much trouble or delay.

With feelings most sanguine, the youth and the maiden continued their way.

An hour passed, but nothing was seen of either Old Lightning or Hurricane Kit.

Suddenly, however, as they rounded a sharp turn in the trail, a spectacle was revealed which caused the young couple to draw rein with exclamations of mingled fear and surprise.

The pass directly ahead of them was full of Indians!

They were Comanches—the same party, in fact, from whom they had escaped a short time before; old Black Fox himself, grim and fierce, rode in front of his warriors.

They had recovered their mustangs, and were riding forward at a brisk walk.

They instantly perceived the young couple, and announced their discovery by a series of exultant whoops, at the same time urging on their mustangs.

Fred Fairfax was quick to realize the perilous situation of himself and his fair companion.

His presence of mind did not for an instant forsake him, and he swiftly wheeled his horse, at the same time catching the rein of Laura's steed, and compelling him to turn also.

The next moment they were riding away like the wind, with the whooping, yelling savages in close pursuit.

Our friends were riding straight back to the point they had started from, and Fred saw that to continue that course they would fall into the power of their other foes.

To avoid this additional danger, the fugitives turned sharply to one side, and plunged wildly into the labyrinth of rocks and bushes.

The Comanches, bent on their recapture, dashed on in close pursuit, filling the air with their fiendish yells.

On dashed the fugitives, until at length the nature of the ground would not admit of further progress on horseback, and they were compelled to dismount.

Supporting Laura Langdon with one arm, young Fairfax toiled desperately up the rugged incline.

The Indians had also dismounted, and were climbing like cats in pursuit.

It was a critical time, for the nimble-footed red-skins were fast gaining on the weary fugitives; but the young man toiled on, striving to reach a position where he could hold his pursuers at bay.

Suddenly they were confronted by a huge ledge, up the steep side of which it was impossible for Laura to climb.

Further progress was effectually checked, and drawing his revolver, Fred Fairfax turned like a lion at bay, determined to defend his fair companion to the last.

As he wheeled, a loud shout came from above, and looking up, the astonished youth beheld Hurricane Kit and Old Lightning standing upon the summit.

The next moment the clarion voice of the old scout reached his ears.

"Ketch hold o' the bushes an' pull yerselves

up," he shouted. "We'll keep the red varmints back. Hurry, now!"

"Ay!" answered Fred, and the next instant the air rung with pistol-shots, commingled with the screeches of the red-skins who were struck by the biting bullets.

The rapid fusillade kept the Comanches in check, and gave Fred Fairfax an opportunity to mount the steep with Laura.

It was a tough task; but after a desperate climb they reached the top, and were assisted to a place of safety by ready hands.

The Comanches, meantime, dismayed by the hot fire that greeted them, had discreetly retreated to shelter.

From behind convenient boulders, they made manifest their disapprobation of affairs by means of sundry whoops and yells.

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Laura Langdon. "We're safe from the red fiends at last."

Old Lightning smiled grimly, as he wiped his smoking weapons preparatory to reloading.

"Let us hope so, leetle gal!" he said, evasively.

The veteran knew full well that the end was not yet.

The Comanches were furious at being baffled when their prey was almost within their grasp, and would doubtless make a determined effort to capture the whites.

However, Old Lightning was confident that, as long as their ammunition lasted, it would be a comparatively easy task to keep the foe from reaching their position.

The whites were well prepared to meet an assault, and if the Comanches succeeded in reaching the top, it would be because they were braver and more persevering than their opponents gave them credit for being.

With their weapons ready for immediate use, our friends watched sharply for the red-skins, on the alert to send a bullet into the body of every savage who exposed himself.

But the cunning warriors took care not to show themselves, hugging their shelter in silence.

Half an hour passed in quietness.

Then, suddenly, the savages burst from cover, and made a dash for the ledge, uttering as they came blood-curdling yells intended to intimidate their antagonists, at the same time discharging a volley of arrows.

The whites dodged nimbly, and the feathery shafts flew harmlessly over their heads or struck against the rocks.

Firm as a rock, with a cocked revolver in either hand, Old Lightning coolly watched the advance of the red-skins, while beside him crouched Hurricane Kit and Fred Fairfax, both eager for the work before them.

"Don't fire a shot until their varmints begin to climb," warned the old scout. "Then up an' give 'em Hail Columby!"

On came the Comanches, yelling like demons.

As they advanced they scattered to the right and left, crouching low to the earth, and wriggling about like serpents to confuse the aim of the whites.

Not a shot came from the trio of defenders, who, safe behind their rocky breastwork,

waited until the savages were fairly at the base of the hill.

"Now, pard!" gritted Old Lightning. "Give 'em blue blazes!"

Three reports, blended as one, rung out upon the air, and as many agonized yells told that the lead had by no means been wasted.

Undaunted by the fate of their comrades, the red-skins scrambled up the hill, clutching at bushes to assist them, and then began an exciting time.

The sharp, spiteful crack of revolvers mingled with the fierce yells of the Comanches, while above all rose the defiant shouts of Old Lightning, as he used his weapons with deadly effect.

Hurricane Kit fired with a coolness and accuracy that always characterized him in the hours of peril, while Fred Fairfax supported the others in a manner that was highly creditable to him.

Laura Langdon crouched upon the ground, sheltered from the flying arrows, a frightened listener to the sounds of the deadly combat that was being waged about her.

The Comanches evinced great courage and determination, by clinging to the side of the hill in the face of the galling fire from above, and working their way upward inch by inch.

They were as hard to shake off as leeches, and some of them succeeded in gaining a position where they could not easily be reached by the bullets of the whites; here they clung, not venturing to show their heads to those above.

Suddenly Old Lightning ceased firing. His weapons were empty. A minute later, and both Kit and Fred were placed in a like predicament.

Exultant yells came from the savages, who seemed to comprehend the situation, and one venturesome savage popped his head up above the wall.

Old Lightning saw the movement, and he acted without an instant's hesitation.

The top of the ridge was covered with fragments of rock, and the old scout, grasping a piece of several pounds' weight, hurled it with all his strength at the painted face.

The head instantly disappeared, while its owner rolled to the bottom of the incline, his skull crushed like an egg-shell.

Hurricane Kit and young Fairfax followed the example of their companion, and a perfect shower of rocks greeted the assailants.

The red-skins were somewhat demoralized by this novel method of attack, for they found it a difficult matter to dodge the flying fragments that filled the air.

The brave trio of defenders capped the climax by turning loose an enormous boulder upon their enemies.

The huge rock tore down the hillside, catching several of the Comanches and grinding them to pulp.

This settled the Indians for the time, and they beat a hasty retreat, leaving fully a dozen of their warriors dead behind them.

It had been a most disastrous assault for them, and it was not probable that they would venture to repeat it, unless under cover of darkness.

The triumphant whites greeted the retreat of their foes with yells of derision, which added considerably to the discomfiture of the red-men.

"Trowsers an' tom-cats!" was the characteristic remark of Old Lightning, as he coolly proceeded to load up his empty shooting-irons. "That 'ere was rather warm while it lasted, but we've give ther red rascallions a reg'lar lambastin' thet they won't forgit in a hurry."

"I fancy," remarked Fred Fairfax, as he wiped the perspiration from his face, "that the rascals will feel sick enough now to move on and leave us in peace."

The veteran shook his head decidedly.

"Not much!" he exclaimed. "You don't know ther reds as well as I do, boyee. Ther varmint's ain't shook off yet, not by a jug-full!"

"Do you think they will venture to attack us again, after meeting with such a bloody repulse?" inquired Hurricane Kit.

"Not now, they won't!" answered Old Lightning. "They're too cunnin' fer thet, after what has occurred. They'll hang around hyar, well under cover, ontill night, an' then under cover o' darkness, they'll sneak in on us like so many coyotes. That's the way o' the Comanche."

"Then what bad we better do, pard—try to get away from here, or remain and take our chances?"

"I ha'n't decided yet," returned the scout. "I mean to take a look at the kentry back of us presently. If there's a good outlook, we'll move on. If not, then we'll stay here, an' trust to luck an' muscle to thrash the Comanches ag'in."

The others agreed to this, relying on the old scout's excellent judgment.

The trio kept up a vigilant watch for the enemy, and if one of the latter had shown his head for an instant, it would have immediately been perforated by a bullet.

However, the red-skins were wise enough to keep well under cover.

The minutes passed by in silence.

Suddenly Old Lightning leaped to his feet with a cry of alarm, for an arrow whizzed by his cheek, grazing his skin, and was shattered against the rocky wall in front of him!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END OF ALL.

"TROWSERS an' tomcats!" cried the old scout, clapping his hand to his cheek and looking bewilderedly around. "Where in ther name of Ole Nick did thet come from?"

No one replied; the veteran's companions were as much mystified as he was.

Old Lightning looked keenly about him in every direction, but no signs of an enemy were to be seen.

Then his gaze fell upon the arrow, which lay upon the ground where it had fallen after passing by his head.

"There's one thing certain. The arrow come from that direction," declared Old Lightning, pointing to the right. "But how in ther name o' Tophet could they— Ha! I have it!"

"What is it, pard?"

"Yer see that butte out yonder, a little higher than this! Waal, it's my opinion that some

o' ther red imps are up there usin' us for targets, tryin' ter pick us off one by one."

The three men watched the designated elevation keenly.

Presently the tufted head of a savage was uplifted, as its owner cast a cautious glance over toward the whites.

Old Lightning's suspicions were verified.

"Trowsers an' tomcats!" cried he, as another shaft whizzed dangerously near them. "This hyar is a-gettin' too hot fer comfort. If we stay here, we'll be picked off like so many black-birds. We must skedaddle!"

"I'm of that opinion, exactly," said Hurricane Kit.

"But we mustn't start without first knowin' where we're a-goin'," added the scout. "I'll take a leetle survey o' the kentry, jist to see how the land lays. While I'm gone, try an' pick off thet cuss on ther top o' yonder butte. I'll be back soon."

So saying, the old scout crawled out of the fort, and disappeared among the rocks.

Hurricane Kit and Fred Fairfax kept a keen watch upon the butte, from which the arrows were fired, but were unable to get a good shot at the hidden marksman.

However, they managed to escape injury, and presently Old Lightning returned.

"All's rosy!" he exclaimed. "There's a deep gulch jist back o' hyar, an' if we kin leave this place without bein' seen, I think we kin give ther varmint's ther slip. Leastwise, we kin try. It's sartin death ter stay hyar, with ther arrers flyin' round so promiscuous."

Accordingly, the little party of fugitives left the place that had so long sheltered them, and made their way in silence to the rear.

Old Lightning led the way, and Fairfax followed, supporting Laura, while Hurricane Kit brought up the rear.

For several minutes they proceeded, and then found themselves in a deep, narrow gorge, through which it was evident that the foot of man had never passed.

The gorge was filled with rocks and tangled bushes, and progress was extremely difficult.

Suddenly a series of loud yells came from the rear.

"Trowsers an' tomcats!" cried the scout, in dismay. "The varmint's hev smelt a rat an' 'll be tearin' after us red-hot. We must run for it."

As he spoke, Old Lightning darted off at increased speed, but scarcely had he taken a dozen steps, when the earth suddenly gave way beneath his feet, and he disappeared from view.

The others came to an abrupt halt, just in time to escape following the scout into the dark, abysmal cavity.

Crouching on the brink, they endeavored to pierce the dense gloom.

What had become of Old Lightning?

This was a question speedily answered, for from out the depths came the unmistakable accents of the veteran.

"Trowsers an' tomcats! Where are ye, pards?"

"Here!" answered Hurricane Kit, quickly

"But where in the name of Old Harry are you?"

"Down hyar in a hole," answered the scout with a chuckle, "an' I've made a big discovery, too. Hurry along! It's only a few feet down. Stir lively afore the red-skins come."

The others obeyed, and making the descent with but little difficulty, stood beside Old Lightning.

"Foller me!" ordered the scout. "This hyar place is a reg'lar tunnel in the hill, an' I reckon we'll slip ther Comanches in high ole style."

Our friends proceeded, and found themselves in a narrow passage running straight into the rock.

A dense gloom pervaded the place, and they could not see an inch ahead, but Old Lightning led on without hesitation.

In some places the tunnel was quite roomy, but in others so small that it was necessary for the fugitives to creep forward on their hands and knees.

They had proceeded but a short distance, when faint shouts were heard at the mouth of the tunnel.

The fugitives instantly knew what it meant.

The Comanches had discovered the passage, and divining the truth, were following in pursuit.

Our friends pressed on as fast as possible, hoping to soon reach a spot where they could turn and hold their enemies at bay.

Several minutes passed by, while the patter of feet told that the red skins were rapidly overhauling them.

Then the walls of the passage suddenly widened, and the fugitives felt rather than knew that they were in a spacious cavern.

Old Lightning stopped abruptly, with a low cry of surprise.

"Look yonder!" he whispered, to his companions, who were close at his side.

What he saw was a number of bright lights, which twinkled in the darkness ahead like so many stars.

They were slowly coming toward them, and their nature was soon revealed.

"They are torches!" exclaimed Hurricane Kit. "There is a party ahead of us."

"Eggsactly!" assented Old Lightning. "But who in blazes are they?"

A sudden thought flashed through the mind of the young adventurer.

"I see now," he exclaimed. "The men ahead of us are Panther Dick and his outlaws. They are searching for the treasure. There are two means of entering the cavern, one being the tunnel we have just passed through, while the other the outlaws have discovered. See!"

The scout uttered an exclamation.

"Trowsers an' tomcats!" he said, excitedly. "I believe you're right, pard."

"I am confident that we are now standing in the treasure-cave," declared Hurricane Kit, positively.

There was a moment's silence.

"Waal," said the scout, "thet's all right as fur as it goes, but there's somethin' else to be considered. The outlaws are in front, ther red-skins behind, an' we're penned up between 'em."

It strikes me thet our position ain't quite as pleasant as it might be."

"What is to be done?" demanded Fred Fairfax, as the girl clung to his arm in terror.

"I have it, called Kit, with sparkling eyes. "The Comanches are dashing up, eager for scalps. We have only to step one side, and they will encounter the outlaws instead."

Old Lightning chuckled gleefully.

"Jest ther thing!" he exclaimed. "The varmints'll run inter each other in ther dark, an' then thar'll be a high ole racket. It'll be a reg'lar case of dog eat dog."

Our friends lost no time in following the suggestion of the youth, and were soon crouching against the wall of the cavern.

Breathlessly they awaited the result of the ruse.

They had but a minute to wait.

The Comanche warriors came rushing past their place of concealment, and the next moment they were close upon the bandits, the light of whose torches was hidden from sight by a turn in the passage.

Suddenly the two parties came together with a crash.

It would be hard telling which was the more astonished, but the outlaws recovered themselves first, and greeted the Comanches with a volley that laid several of their warriors low.

The red-skins responded with a volley of arrows, and then began a terrible hand-to-hand encounter.

The torches of the bandits were speedily extinguished, and the combatants fought in utter darkness.

The sharp crack of revolvers echoed and re-echoed from the rocky walls of the cavern, arrows and tomahawks hurtled through the air, while bullets beat a death's tattoo upon the rugged walls; and above all rose the cries of the contestants, as they strove desperately for the mastery. It seemed for the time as if pandemonium had broken loose in the treasure-cave.

Fully ten minutes the battle raged, without abating in violence.

Then the noise of conflict grew fainter, and finally it ceased altogether.

Once more the cavern was wrapt in silence.

Meanwhile our friends had remained eager listeners to the sounds of the terrible battle raging close at hand.

"Ther show seems ter be over," remarked Old Lightning, grimly. "I wonder which side beat, er perhaps they all went under, like the Kilkenny cats. Trowsers an' tom-cats! This is a snap. Here these varmints hev chewed each other ter pieces, like so many wild-cats, an' now we kin come down with a full hand an' sweep ther board."

"Hist!" uttered Hurricane Kit, warningly. "I hear footsteps."

All listened attentively.

Presently a light appeared, and two men approached, one of them holding a torch above his head.

They were Panther Dick, the outlaw chief, and his lieutenant, Senora Jose, the only survivors of the terrible fight.

Covered with blood and dirt from head to

foot, the two men presented a terrible appearance, as viewed by the flickering light of the torch.

They halted in the center of the cavern without observing the four persons who crouched in the shadows.

"Ha, ha, captain!" exclaimed Sonora Jose, exultantly. "Things have turned out well. The men are all dead, and that leaves only us to share the treasure!"

"Ay, Jose! We're in luck!" answered Panther Dick, but there was a devilish gleam in his eyes as he spoke, which, if his companion could have seen it, would have warned him to be on his guard.

The outlaw was standing slightly in advance of his chief, and the latter cautiously drew his knife from his belt.

Then came a lightning-like movement and the keen blade was buried to the hilt in the breast of Sonora Jose.

Panther Dick had struck swift and sure, and the luckless desperado fell dead without a cry.

"Ha, ha!" cried the outlaw as he stood over the lifeless form of his late lieutenant. "Fool you were to think that I would divide with you. No! The trapper's treasure shall be mine and mine alone!"

"Beg pardon, my friend, but I don't exactly agree with you!"

Coolly the words were uttered as Hurricane Kit stepped out from his place of concealment and confronted the outlaw, a cocked revolver in his hand.

"The jig is up," continued the youth, "so you may as well surrender. We hold a full hand, so throw up yours before you are riddled with bullets."

"Ay, throw up yer bloody paws afore we fill yer so full ov holes that ye can't hold water," supplemented Old Lightning, taking up a position beside Kit, weapon in hand.

Panther Dick took in the situation at a glance.

He instantly saw that the game was up.

His only thoughts now were of escape, and he did not hesitate a moment.

Swiftly he dashed the torch to the ground, and then, under cover of the darkness, turned and fled.

But Hurricane Kit was after him like a grim Nemesis.

Up the passage sped the fugitive, fear lending wings to his flight; but he was weak from loss of blood, and his pursuer was soon close behind him.

Suddenly the outlaw slipped and fell, at the very brink of a yawning chasm which ran beside the passage; he made a desperate but vain effort to recover his balance, and then went down—down into the abysmal depths.

There was a loud, despairing cry, followed by a sickening thud, as the body of the doomed bandit struck the jagged rocks far below. Then all was still!

Panther Dick had met his fate at last; his long, crime-stained career was ended.

But little remains to add.

The bands of outlaws and Comanches both were totally annihilated—not one escaped to tell the story of that bloody struggle in the treasure-cave.

The trapper's treasure proved to be a thing of reality, though perhaps not as large as it had been represented to be; nevertheless, our friends found wealth enough to richly reward them for the perils and hardships they had undergone.

Several days were spent in rest which was greatly needed, and then the triumphant party started for Fort Phillips, mounted on the horses of the outlaws.

Of course they carried the treasure with them, loaded upon extra horses taken for that purpose, and after a long and fatiguing journey reached their destination in safety.

Fred Fairfax and Laura Langdon received a hearty welcome from their friends, by whom they had been given up as lost.

A short time after there was a wedding at the fort, and the reader can easily guess who were the parties most particularly concerned.

Our friends, Hurricane Kit and Old Lightning, were among the guests.

However, their bold, adventurous dispositions would not permit them to remain within the bounds of civilization, and they once more turned their faces to the West, to seek new adventures in the wild land of gold.

And there we may meet with them again; but to the present portion of their life we will merely add—

THE END.

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